

MEDICAL CARE FOR CHRONIC PAIN

Getting the most out of your medical care

In this section we will go over some important things to know about getting medical care for chronic pain, like:

- ~ what your healthcare provider may ask about
- ~ what you can ask your healthcare provider
- ~ tips to get the most out of your healthcare visits

Unfortunately, anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination still show up in the healthcare system. There are also long wait times for specialists and short healthcare visits.

Many things can make people hesitant to get medical care. And when they go get care, they often feel frustrated, uncertain, and discouraged.

The good news is there are many things being done to improve the healthcare system. Knowing what to expect and what your options are can help you get the most out of your healthcare visits.

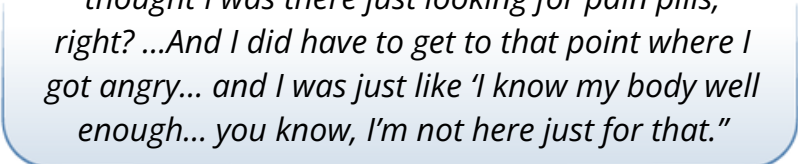
"it takes a lot for somebody to walk through that door to even go ask for help"





Safety and respect

It is **your right to feel safe and respected** when talking with your healthcare providers.

This also means you should never be treated unfairly because of your skin colour, age, gender, culture or religion.



"I went through that medication thing where they thought I was there just looking for pain pills, right? ...And I did have to get to that point where I got angry... and I was just like 'I know my body well enough... you know, I'm not here just for that.'"



"...it's an attitude, you know? With doctors. You're down here and your doctor is way up here."

If you feel that you are not treated fairly by your healthcare provider, you have the right to:

- Speak up and explain to the provider that what they said or did was wrong. Be specific about what was said or done and how that made you feel.
- Make a formal complaint to the clinic or hospital. Sometimes this can be done anonymously, but not always.
- Ask to be referred to a different healthcare provider.

It may also help to talk to other people you trust to figure out your options.



You also have the right to:

- Practice your culture and customs. This means using traditional medicines and ceremonies in hospitals or clinics.
- Choose pain management tools and care plans. You can refuse any medical test or treatment. If you refuse any test or treatment, it should not affect the care you receive from that provider, clinic, or hospital.
- Privacy about chronic pain care.



Your doctor should:

- Clearly explain your condition and all your pain management options.
- Discuss ways to support you with your care plan, like accessing local programs and services.
- Be responsive to the impact of your culture and cultural history on your wellbeing.
- Respect your pain management choices.

"You can have that relationship with a doctor as long as you're... it's all about being able to say your piece, right? ...And letting them know where YOU'RE coming from. A lot of people don't do that."



Healthcare providers have a **responsibility to provide safe and high quality health care** for every patient.

We created resources for healthcare providers to teach them how to provide better care to First Nations People.

TIPS for speaking with your healthcare provider:

1. Ask if there is an **Indigenous patient navigator** at the hospital or clinic you are visiting.
2. **Ask questions.** For example, if your healthcare provider suggests a medical test or a treatment, ask:
 - Can you explain what this is or what this does?
 - Why do you recommend this for me?
 - Are there any risks or problems people experience with this?
 - Where and how can I access this?
 - Is there anything else I need to know before I do/start/try this?
3. Ask **where you can find more information** about your condition or about the test or treatment they suggest. They should tell you who you can talk to. They should also suggest brochures or books you can read, or websites with more information.
4. **Bring someone you trust** to your healthcare appointment to support you and advocate for you.





Your healthcare visit

A full workup is needed to get to the right diagnosis and treatment plan for chronic pain.

What to expect from your healthcare visit for chronic pain

Chronic pain is a complex health condition. For this reason, proper healthcare for chronic pain should include a good understanding of what is wrong and a plan for how to manage the pain.

If something changes in how your pain feels or where the pain is located, some tests may need to be repeated. Or you may need some new or different tests to be done.

You may also need to change your pain management strategies over time. Or you may need to add new ones to what you and your healthcare provider are already doing.

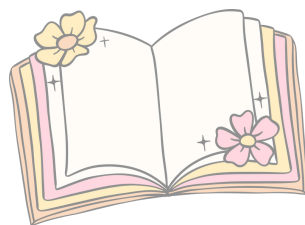
Keep in mind that each person's chronic pain condition is unique, so they may need different tests and treatments.

Care options may also differ across doctors and clinics.

A proper full workup

To be able to give you the best care possible, your doctor needs to understand *you* and *your pain* as much as possible. A full workup includes questions and tests that help the doctor diagnose and treat your condition.

Your doctor needs to ask about things that relate to your pain in the past, present, and future. Think of this as your **chronic pain story**.



1. Your chronic pain experience

Your doctor will need to know about what your experience of chronic pain is like. They will ask questions about:

- What your pain feels like and how strong it is
- Where you feel pain in your body
- What may have caused your pain
- How often your pain shows up
- What things make your pain better or worse



Learn about how to explain your pain on Page 10 in the “What is Chronic Pain” section.

2. Your health

Your doctor will need to know if you have any other health conditions and what medications you take on a daily basis. It can be helpful to write a list of your medications and doses and bring it with you to your visits.

Your mental health and emotional well-being should be part of the conversation about your overall health.

3. Your sleep and rest

Your doctor will need to know if your pain gets in the way of falling asleep or staying asleep. They will ask how many hours you usually sleep at night and if you take naps or rest during the day.

4. Your daily activities

Your doctor will need to know if your pain gets in the way of carrying out your day-to-day activities at home, in your community, and at work. This may include things like:

- taking care of yourself, your home, and your family, like bathing, cooking, or cleaning
- working, if you have a job
- getting places, like walking or driving
- taking part in cultural or community activities
- doing hobbies

5. Other issues affecting your health

Your doctor will need to know if there are any other important things that affect your pain or how you manage your pain. This includes talking about how your pain affects your relationships and if you have people in your life who support you.

They may also ask if there are things that get in the way of caring for your well-being, like physical or financial barriers.

"massages are really expensive. ...And then...in order for you to get it covered, you have to go to a specialist, and she was way out in [name of community]. That's two hours away from me."

Your chronic pain care plan

Decisions for how to manage your chronic pain are yours to make.

A **chronic pain care plan** is a plan for how you and your doctor will work together to manage your chronic pain.

It is unusual for chronic pain to go away completely. This is why your chronic pain care plan should focus on lowering your pain. It should also include ways to manage your pain to make it easier for you to carry out your daily activities.

To do this, you and your doctor should agree on your pain management goal.

A care plan is made by you and your doctor together by having a clear and open discussion.

Your doctor should help you make decisions.

They should tell you about all your options and answer all your questions.



When talking about your care plan, it's a good time to let your doctor know if you prefer Western medical healing methods, Traditional Anishinaabe Culture styles of healing, or a combination.



What a good care plan looks like

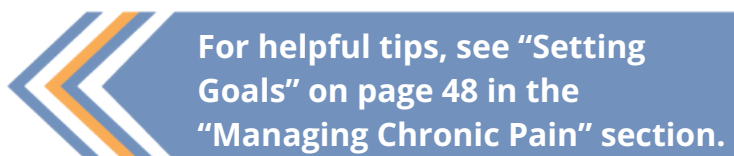
A chronic pain care plan will look different for everyone. But, there are some things that every good care plan should have. A good care plan:

- is designed *for you* and *by you*
- is wholistic (includes activities for heart, mind, spirit and body)
- has actions for you and your healthcare team (and may include actions for others who support you)

You are the expert on your pain and what feels right for you. You know best what is important to you, what is possible to achieve, and what things may get in your way.

Setting chronic pain management goals

Chronic pain management goals should focus on specific actions to lower your pain. They should also include ways to manage your pain day-to-day to help you do the things that matter to you.





Pain medications

If your doctor suggests a pain medication, get all the information you need before deciding to use it or not.

Decisions about medications are yours to make and should not affect the care you receive.

Pain medications can be a helpful tool to lower pain when used alongside other strategies to manage pain. But pain medications can also be overused by taking them too much or for too long.

Overuse of pain medications can lead to tolerance. Tolerance means the medication stops working or you need higher amounts for pain relief.





Some, but not all, pain medications can be addictive. **Opioids** are a type of medication that can be addictive.

Over-prescribing of opioids by doctors has had devastating impacts on Canadians. Indigenous Peoples and communities have been especially affected. Still, there may be times when opioids are needed or helpful for pain.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for reliable information on pain medications. You can also read **trusted sources** on the internet, like [mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org) and [webmd.com](https://www.webmd.com).

Things to know about pain medications

The medication your doctor may suggest will depend on:

-  the kind of pain you are having
-  how strong your pain is
-  what other pain medications you have already tried
-  your overall health

Your doctor may recommend medication to be taken every day or only “as needed”. Your doctor may also recommend a combination of medications to help manage pain.

Side effects of medications

In addition to the desired effects, like pain relief, medications can have other effects, called **side effects**.

Side effects may be so mild that you barely notice them. Or they may be so strong and uncomfortable that you don’t want to keep using the medication.

It’s important to ask your doctor about the common side effects of medications so you know what to expect. It is also important to talk with your doctor if you think you are having unwanted side effects from your medication.

Forms of medications

Medications come in different forms. Some, like pills, capsules, and liquids are taken by swallowing them.

Other medications like creams or gels can be rubbed on your skin. Some, called suppositories, can be inserted into your rectum or vagina. There are also medications that are injected into your body using a needle.

Over-the-counter pain medications

You can buy over-the-counter medications for pain without a prescription from a doctor. These types of medication **do not contain opioids**.

You can get and take these medications on your own. But, it is best to discuss them with your doctor to understand the best and safest way to use them.

Some common types of over-the counter pain medications are: ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), acetaminophen (Tylenol), or acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin).

Prescription pain medications

You can only buy certain pain medications if you have a prescription from a doctor.

There are many types of prescription pain medications. Some of them **do not contain opioids**, like nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

Prescription pain medications that **do contain opioids** are drugs like morphine, hydromorphone, oxycodone, tramadol, or codeine.

Opioid pain medications are good for pain when it's very strong, like after surgery or injury. But, they can have uncomfortable side effects. If misused, taking opioids can lead to dependence and even overdose.

For links to more info about
opioid medications see page 68 in
the "Resources" section.

Finding the right pain medication for you

It may take some time and some trial and error before you find the right pain medication for you.

Many medications can take a few weeks before you notice their effects. Ask your doctor about what to expect.

To reduce the risks of side effects of medication, doctors usually start with a low amount (called a dose). Then they may slowly increase the amount of medication over time. The goal is to find a dose that works for you.

Using medication safely

Here are some important things to keep in mind when using pain medications:

- Use pain medications exactly as prescribed by your doctor. Speak to your doctor if you feel the medication is too strong or is not working for you.
- Store medication in a secure location away from children, youth, or others who may misuse it.
- Never share your prescription medication with anyone else.
- Dispose of unused medications safely. You can return unused medication to any pharmacy.



Questions you can ask about pain medications:



- Why is this medication recommended for me?
- Is this medication addictive? Is this an opioid?
- How does this medication work? What does it do in the body?
- How long will it take before it starts working?
- Are there any side effects? How common are these side effects?
- Will I need any tests while I'm on this medication?
- Do I take this medication with or without food? Should I avoid any food or drink when I take it?
- Is this medication safe to take with other medications I am already taking?
- What if I miss a dose?
- How much does this medication cost?
- What is the next step if this medication doesn't work for me?