

Living well with chronic pain

heart | mind | spirit | body

Based on stories from
Grand Council Treaty #3
communities



FIND OUT ABOUT



What is chronic pain



Managing chronic pain



Medical care for chronic pain



In partnership with:



GANAWISHKADAWE
Tending The Heart of the Fire



**Santé
Canada**

**Health
Canada**

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.

For companion resources on
Living Well with Chronic Pain
visit:

gct3.ca/social/health/chronic-pain



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About this toolkit

Welcome to the toolkit for living well with chronic pain

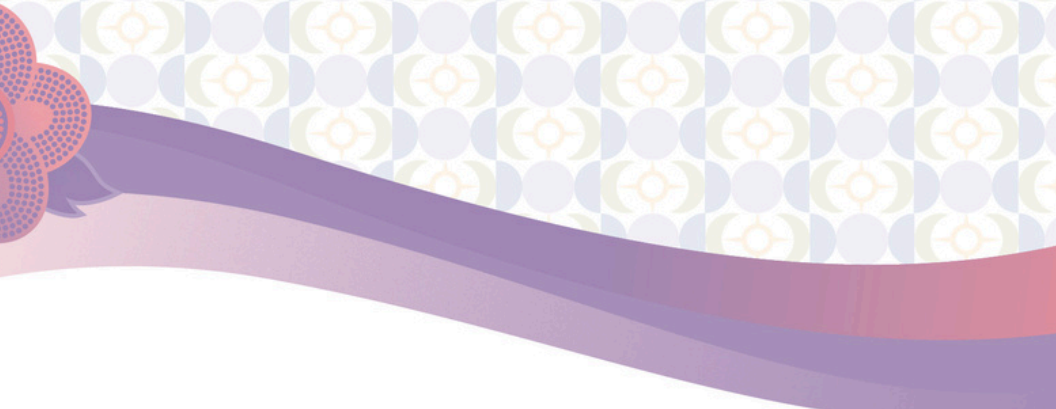
This toolkit was created to support community members of the Anishinaabe Nation of Treaty #3 who are living with chronic pain.

We hope it may also support other First Nations, Inuit and Métis people across Turtle Island living with chronic pain.

The information in this toolkit was guided by stories and knowledge shared by community members from Treaty #3 and reflects both Traditional Anishinaabe and Western knowledge about chronic pain, wellness, and healing.

This toolkit is a way of sharing information. Keep in mind, any approach to healing and living well may work well for one person, but not as well for another. It is up to each person to decide what the right approach is for them.

The information provided is not meant to be used as medical advice and should not replace seeking advice from a medical professional.



Please know that you are not alone on your journey with chronic pain. There are others out there who understand what you are going through and can support you.

There are also resources available to help you in your community, in Treaty #3 territory, and beyond.

Living well with chronic pain is not easy, but it can be done! We hope this toolkit helps.

Acknowledgements

This toolkit was created in partnership between:

- GCT#3 Health Transformation Team
- Transitional Pain Service at University Health Network
- Ganawishkadawe, the Centre for Wise Practices in Indigenous Health at Women's College Hospital

The partners held sharing circles in all four directions in the spring of 2023 to hear about experiences of chronic pain.

Meegwetch to everyone who shared their stories and knowledge with our teams and everyone else who worked hard to bring this toolkit to life.

WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN

Perspectives from a Western medical approach

In this section, we will go over how chronic pain is understood from a Western medical approach because:

- 1) knowing the common terms used in healthcare may help when speaking with healthcare providers and searching for more information on pain management.
- 2) knowing why pain happens and what makes it worse can help you manage your pain.

We acknowledge that this is only one way in which chronic pain can be understood and other ways can also be helpful in managing pain.





Understanding chronic pain

Chronic pain is ongoing pain that lasts for more than three months.

Chronic pain is common and affects about one in five people. It can show up at any age. You may feel it all the time. Or it may come and go. It may be worse at certain times and better at others.

Chronic pain may start after an injury like a car accident. Or it may be connected to a medical condition like arthritis or nerve pain from diabetes.

Sometimes there is no obvious or known reason for the pain, but that doesn't mean the pain isn't real.

Chronic pain is often a life-long disease, but you CAN learn to manage it to lower your pain and improve your quality of life.

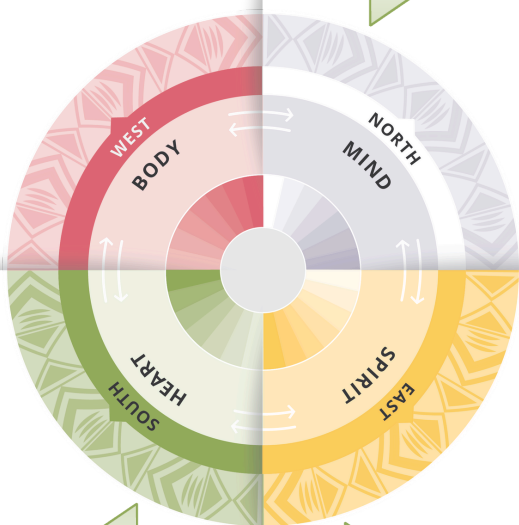
Chronic pain can affect all parts of you

***Trouble doing
daily activities***

*"It's so hard, eh? It's
exhausting when you're
in pain...it's so tiring."*

***Feeling angry,
frustrated, sad***

*"You're constantly looking
down on yourself... You
feel shamed for feeling
this, not being able to do
certain things..."*



*"I kind of keep to myself.
I don't want nobody else
to know that I'm in pain
all the time."*

*"And then sometimes
the pain and everything
gets so bad. ...I just, cry
'cuz there's nothing else
to do."*

***Trouble connecting
to others***

Feeling hopeless

Chronic pain is an invisible condition

Other people like family, friends, co-workers, community, and healthcare providers can't see your pain.

Because pain is invisible, sometimes other people may not believe your pain or may not take your pain seriously.

Not being believed can be very hurtful and make you feel even worse. You may feel:

- hurt and sad
- misunderstood
- isolated and lonely
- frustrated and angry

Your pain is real.
Just because others can't see it, it doesn't mean that it should be ignored.



Chronic pain is unique to each person

Chronic pain can feel different from one person to another. How pain shows up for you can depend on the things that happened in the past and the things going on in your life right now.

Your experience of chronic pain is unique to you, but you are not alone!

How chronic pain feels

Chronic pain may show up as different types of feelings in the body. The pain may be constant, always there in the background. Or it can show up suddenly and go away.

How intense or strong pain feels can change. It may be different across the cycle of the day or week. It may change depending on the season or weather.

TIP: Keeping a journal or writing down when your pain shows up or gets worse can be helpful for pain management and visits with healthcare providers.

Chronic pain may feel sharp like a quick pinch or dull like a lasting ache. For some people it may feel like throbbing or burning. Other people may feel tingling or shooting pain. Some people may feel pain that's like an electric shock.

Here are some more words to describe chronic pain:

- aching
- biting
- burning
- cold
- dull
- excruciating
- nagging
- nauseating
- numb
- piercing
- radiating
- sharp
- shooting
- sore
- spreading
- stabbing
- stinging
- tender
- throbbing
- tingling

What words best describe your pain?



Where and when do you feel the most pain?

How pain works in the body

Pain is a normal part of life. It is a feeling you have in response to an actual or potential threat to the body.

Pain protects your body from danger or harm. It is your body's warning signal.

Pain is not always a sign of injury

Having pain doesn't always mean that there is injury or damage to the body.

Some things can hurt, but don't do any harm. Think of the feeling of "brain freeze" when you eat ice cream. It hurts but doesn't do any harm.



And sometimes a person can have a serious injury, but not feel any pain.

Some people have been hurt playing a sport or during their job but they don't remember feeling any pain until later.

These examples show that **"hurt doesn't always equal harm"**. Why does this happen?

How much pain you feel is decided by your brain.

In an intense situation like playing a competitive sport or focusing on a job, your brain may not produce pain when you're hurt to help you focus on your goal.

At other times, when you're not distracted and really focus on the pain, even a paper cut or a hang nail can really hurt.

Let's take a closer look at how pain works in the body.

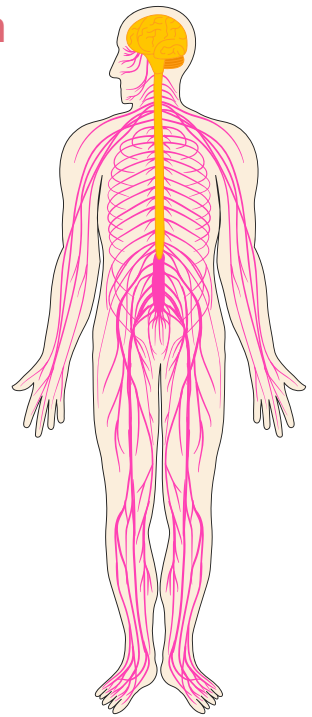
Pain and the nervous system

The nervous system is made up of the brain and the spinal cord (shown in **yellow**), and peripheral nerves (shown in **pink**). All these parts are involved in processing pain.

Think of the nervous system like an alarm system. The **peripheral nerves** detect sensations in the body. They send messages about these sensations through the **spinal cord** to the **brain**.

These messages can be about:

- temperature changes, like hot and cold
- mechanical changes, like a pinch, pressure, or cut
- chemical changes, like lactic acid in sore muscles, allergens, or inflammation in the body



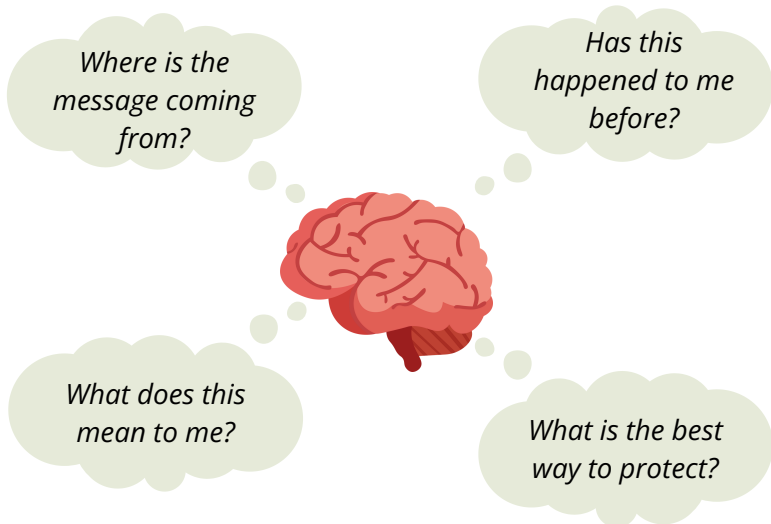
When a message gets to the brain, it goes to many different areas in the brain. All these areas work together to process the message. The brain then decides what needs to be done next to protect the body.

If the brain decides that there is danger to the body, the alarm system usually goes off and you feel pain.



The experience of pain

The experience you feel as pain comes from the brain. The brain takes stock of the whole situation before setting off the pain alarm. It takes into account what is going on in your body and in the outside world. It also considers your past experiences.



When the brain decides that protecting a part of the body is needed, then you feel pain!

Useful pain terms you may come across

Acute pain

Nociceptive (no-see-cep-tive) pain is pain that is related to an injury or damage to a part of the body. This is the most common type of pain.

Neuropathic (new-ro-path-ick) pain is pain that is related to damage to the nerves in the body. This type of pain often shows up in diabetes.

Nociplastic (no-see-plas-tick) pain is pain that comes from changes to the way that the body's pain system works. This type of pain shows up in conditions like fibromyalgia.



Things to Remember:

- Chronic pain lasts 3 months or more.
- Hurt does not always equal harm.
- All pain is produced by the brain.
- The brain considers the whole situation before setting off the pain alarm.

Health conditions and chronic pain

There are some common health conditions that make chronic pain more likely to show up.

Arthritis

Arthritis is a disease that causes inflammation and swelling of one or more joints in the body. It is also a common cause of chronic pain.

Arthritis pain often comes with sore and stiff joints. The pain can be in different parts of the body, like feet, ankles, knees, hips, wrists, or fingers. It often shows up on both sides of the body.

The pain may be there all the time, or it may come and go. It may be most noticeable when you first wake up or when you haven't moved for a while. You may also have numbness of the joints. It may be difficult to move your joints when you have pain from arthritis.

For more information visit the Arthritis Society Canada website (arthritis.ca).



Diabetes

Diabetes is a chronic disease that occurs when sugar levels in the blood are too high.

Having high blood sugar for a long time can damage nerves in the body. Damage affects how nerves send pain signals. This nerve damage is called **diabetic neuropathy**.

Diabetic neuropathy can show up as feelings of numbness and tingling pain in the hands, legs, and feet. Some people describe it as electric shock or burning pain.

Diabetes also causes inflammation in the body that can cause pain in the joints and muscles.

If you have diabetes, keeping your blood sugar levels in check can help prevent damage to nerves or keep damage from getting worse. You can do this by getting more physical activity in your day, eating nutritious foods, and taking certain medications.



Injury

Chronic pain can also show up after an injury like a fall or an accident.

Some injuries are more serious than others, but they all come with having some pain. The pain usually goes away once the injury to the body has healed.

Sometimes pain after an injury can last for longer than the time it takes to heal. If pain lasts for more than 3 months after an injury, then it may have become chronic pain.

To prevent chronic pain after the an injury, it's important to keep your level of pain under control. It also helps to address any worries or stress that you may have.

— When getting treatment for your injury, talk to your healthcare provider about how much pain you have.

Ask a healthcare provider about mental health supports available in your community. These can help you cope with any post-traumatic stress or worries about pain or the injury.



Surgery

Many people have surgery for different health reasons. There is usually some pain after surgery that normally goes away once the body has healed.

Sometimes pain after surgery can last for longer than the healing process. If pain lasts for more than 3 months after surgery, it may have become chronic pain.

If you're having surgery, it's important to tell your surgery healthcare team if you:

- already have chronic pain
- are really worried about pain or surgery
- are already taking opioid medications
- do not have a lot of support
- are in a lot of pain after the surgery

This information will help your surgery team better manage your pain after surgery.



Why pain persists

The nervous system changes and adapts

The nervous system can change as you go through life. This ability to change is called **neuroplasticity**.

Neuroplasticity helps the nervous system to adapt to the different experiences in your life.

The good and bad things that happen to you in childhood and in later life can affect how the nervous system works.

The nervous system gets more sensitive

Sometimes the nervous system may get more sensitive to try to protect you from future dangers.

It may become like a fire alarm going off even after the fire is out.

When this fire alarm goes off, you may continue to feel pain even after an injury has healed.



When the brain and spinal cord become more sensitive, here are some things that can happen:

Hyperalgesia:

things that already hurt start to hurt more

Allodynia:

things that didn't hurt before start to hurt now

Connections in the brain get stronger

Another example of neuroplasticity is when connections in the brain become stronger.

Imagine pathways through snow. When everyone takes the same path, it gets easier and faster to get through the snow.

Connections in the brain that send pain signals can become like these pathways in the snow.

The brain pathways get stronger over time and pain messages can get across faster.

The pain alarm gets activated more easily and pain shows up more often.



The pathways in the brain are shaped by the good and bad experiences in your life. Pain pathways can get stronger because of things like injury, stress, or trauma.

Your experiences can affect pain

Things that happen in your life can affect your experience of pain. Even your thoughts and feelings can make pain better or worse.

Your thoughts and feelings

What you think and feel affects your body chemistry and can affect your pain.

Your thoughts and emotions help the brain decide if the body needs protection in the form of pain. What you think and feel can also affect how quick your nervous system is to raise the pain alarm.

For example, worrying that something is really wrong with you may make pain worse. Calming thoughts can make pain better.

Chronic pain often brings up difficult feelings like anger, frustration, worry, or sadness. These feelings can also make pain worse. Calming practices can help you cope with difficult feelings *and* help to manage pain.

See Page 31 in the “Managing Chronic Pain” section for helpful calming practices you can do on your own.

Mental health and pain go hand in hand

Mental health and chronic pain can affect each other. People who have chronic pain are more likely to:

- have anxiety or depression
- have stress and trauma
- struggle with using drugs and alcohol



Anxiety and depression

Anxiety shows up as intense worry, tension, and dread about things that might happen in the future. It may feel like you're always on alert.

Anxiety can also show up as intense worry about how bad your pain will get and how you'll cope with it.

It's normal to have anxiety once in a while or when under pressure. But, constant anxiety can get in the way of daily activities and make pain worse.

Depression shows up as a feeling of sadness and emptiness that doesn't go away. It may also come with irritability and frustration.

Depression may come along with anxiety or feeling restless. It may bring a loss of interest in things. It can come with feeling hopeless and like life is not worth living.

Depression can make it harder to do daily activities. It can get in the way of work, hobbies, and relationships. It can also affect sleep and reduce energy levels.

Stress and trauma

Stress is when you feel worried, tense, or upset from a difficult situation. Stress can worsen your pain.

Pain can also affect how you respond to stressful situations. Learning to manage stress is an important part of managing chronic pain.

Trauma is a response to a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience like an act of violence or a frightening accident.

Even witnessing something scary happen to someone else can lead to trauma.

You may also carry the heavy burden of trauma from the harmful things that happened to your parents, your grandparents, and other ancestors through colonization.

Trauma is also connected to colonization. Colonization often involved violent, oppressive practices that deeply harmed many in the community.

For example, survivors of residential or day schools might have trauma that affects their families. Trauma passed down from one generation to the next is called **intergenerational trauma**.

Trauma can have a long-lasting negative effect on your emotions and health.

Living with trauma can also affect your experience of pain. Healing from trauma is a powerful way to help manage chronic pain.

Substance use and addiction

Some people who have chronic pain may turn to alcohol or illegal drugs to help them cope. These may provide short-term relief. But using them can cause **substance use disorder** (also called addiction).

Some people may develop a substance use disorder from certain pain medications, like opioids. Overusing opioids can increase pain sensitivity and worsen things long-term.

See Page 65 in the “Medical Care for Chronic Pain section” for useful tips on safely taking pain medication.



Taking care of your mental health is an important part of pain management. There are things you can do on your own to support your mental health. Connecting with others is also important.

For ways to support your mental health, see pages 27-32 in the “Managing Chronic Pain” section.

Your experience and pain: The good news

The ability of the nervous system to change and adapt means that pain can get better!

There are things you can do to make the nervous system change and become less sensitive. See the next chapter for helpful strategies to manage pain.



Things to Remember:

- Pain persists because of changes in the nervous system.
- Your experiences can affect chronic pain.
- Mental health and pain are connected.
- Since the nervous system can change, chronic pain can be changed too!



MANAGING CHRONIC PAIN

Practices for heart, mind, spirit, and body

It is unusual for chronic pain to go away completely. But, it is possible to live well with chronic pain.

In this section, we will go over the most helpful things you can do to lower your pain and live your fullest life.

Finding what works for you can take some time.

It helps to have an open mind and try new things.

Most people find that the best way to manage their chronic pain is by using a combination of wellness practices for the four aspects of well-being (Kanandawi-Bimaatiziwin): heart, mind, spirit, and body.



Chronic pain is best managed using a combination of practices

Here are some quotes from others in community who shared about how they manage their chronic pain.

"That's the key right there for arthritis - exercising. Walking, riding a bike."

"yeah, uh, that's a biggie...swimming, being in the sun...being in the bush, picking medicines - it's such a healing thing."

"Physically I don't have much control over it. Mentally I do. I rely on my culture. I rely on meditation. I rely on things that keep me mentally OK."



"Sharing is part of the healing."

"...we need to support one another."

"...and the ones that I teach is my grandkids... I show them what to do. And...it makes me feel better when I see them do that..."



Heart

Inamanji'owin
(Emotional)

We need to resolve any negative feelings we may have about ourselves or the people around us.

When we speak about Heart, we are speaking about emotions, relationships, and communication. We need our heart to guide us to maintain personal balance.

Getting to know your emotions

We all experience emotions (or feelings) every day, like love, anger, joy, sadness, or guilt. We also carry emotions from things that happened in the past.

For our emotions to be in balance, we need to be aware of what we are feeling and be able to express it. Avoiding or blocking emotions only leads to more pain.

“what the Elders said to me is – when you hold a lot of pain physically, emotionally - if you hold it in and you don't let it go then it starts to deteriorate the rest of your body.”

To help reflect on your emotions, try asking yourself:

- What am I feeling right now?
- Where did this feeling come from?
- Why did this feeling come up now?

There are many different ways to express emotions, like talking with someone you trust, writing emotions in a journal or a poem, and making music or art.

*"...feels good inside to let it out
instead of just keeping it in."*



Nourishing Relationships

Chronic pain can make you feel lonely and isolated. This is especially true if others don't believe or understand you, or if you can't join in social activities like you used to.

Nobody except you feels exactly what you feel. **But you are not alone.**

We are nourished when we spend time with family, friends, and community members. And they are nourished by our company. Keeping in touch and spending time with others can ease the difficulties of living with chronic pain.

"...we need to support one another. We need to go and visit one another and talk to each other. And not leave anybody out or alone - because that's where the danger is."

Being gentle with yourself

Many times we do not give ourselves the same love and kindness that we give others. You deserve the same patience, love, and compassion you show others.

If you are having a hard day or a day with more pain than usual, take care of yourself. Do something nice for yourself and allow yourself to rest if possible.

Helping others

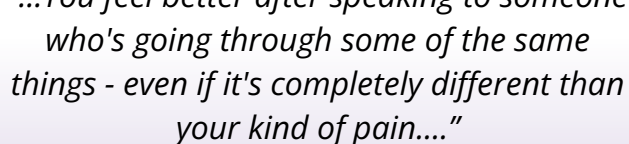
Helping others can be healing. It reminds us that we have gifts and talents, and that sharing them brings joy.

Even simple acts of kindness can bring feelings of connection with others and with our greater purpose. And they can help take the focus off your pain for a little while.

Connecting with others who live with pain

Connecting with others who live with chronic pain is a great way to learn about new tools, tips, and tricks to lower pain or manage daily activities. You may also learn about clinics, doctors, and healers that may be able to help you.

If you're worried about privacy, try searching for online support groups or forums. You can read and share information there, anonymously.



"...You feel better after speaking to someone who's going through some of the same things - even if it's completely different than your kind of pain...."



Mind

Inendamowin (Mental)

We need balance and the healing of mental anguish from childhood to live a healthy life.

Living with chronic pain is hard, tiring, and it can be frustrating. It affects what we think about and how we think. Chronic pain can be a powerful negative force on our mental health.

“the pain could really narrow your eyesight, your focus. You know, it's like somebody wearing blinders because that's where your focus is. And it's hard to get out [of] your mind - out of that pain-centered living.”

There are different ways that can help manage difficult thoughts when they come up.

Sometimes we may become so used to thinking a certain way about pain that we don't even realize we are doing it. Or we may not know how to stop it or change it.

But thoughts are not facts. Calming the mind and the body can be a helpful first step to managing difficult thoughts.

Relaxation and breathing techniques

Relaxation can help you calm the mind, loosen muscle tension, reduce stress, and increase feelings of well-being. It can also help you sleep better and give you more energy.

You can try it on your own by gently focusing on the flow of your breathing. Find a comfortable position for your body and take slow deep breaths. Focus on the flow of the breath as you inhale and exhale at a comfortable pace.



Mindfulness practices

Mindfulness practices are about learning to focus on the present moment without judgment. This includes noticing your breath and body sensations as being there just as they are. Mindfulness can also help you relax the body and calm the mind.

To get started, try listening to a recording of a guided relaxation or mindfulness meditation. Many free recordings are available online.



Focusing on the things that matter to you

Chronic pain can make it hard to do things like you used to. This can be tough to accept.

Think of what matters most, like family, friends, activities you love, or meaningful work. Try to find ways you can still engage with these people and activities. What are small steps you can take to enjoy these parts of life?

Getting support for mental health

Talking to someone who is trained to support you can help a lot when you feel distressed. It is one of the best things anyone can do for their mental health.

Mental health professionals like psychologists, counselors, and psychotherapists use talk therapy. It can help you examine your life and learn new coping skills.

"...that psychological treatment should be an asset for our First Nations because you gotta release what's up here because it has control on our emotions and our physical being."

"one of the things is... with us, is - it's hard to talk about ourselves and how we feel - because it's painful. So, I really understand that... um - but we do need to. It's, it's so healing when we do."

If you have a lot of distress and are struggling to cope, it may help to talk to a mental health professional or a trusted and respected Elder.

See Page 69 in the "Resources" section for a list of contacts to reach out to for mental health support.

A hand holding a lit sage smudge stick over a small wooden bowl. The smoke is rising from the stick. The background is blurred.

Spirit

Manaandaawan (Spiritual)

We need to accept our momentary place on this earth and look to a higher spiritual being for understanding and destiny.

Attending to spirit brings many benefits. Spiritual practices can remind us of our connection to all other relations past, present, and future. Nurturing spiritual connections can bring feelings of belonging and peace.

Even if you don't think of yourself as "spiritual", there are practices you can do to strengthen this part of yourself.

You may find that doing spiritual practices is comforting. It brings perspective and helps you accept things beyond your control.

"Each one of us has a responsibility to get in touch with the creator or God or Buddha or however you pray - you need that connection otherwise you're lost. ...you know, somebody's looking after each one of us... And how you do that is entirely up to you..."

Practicing being grateful

Feeling grateful does not always come easily. We may have to practice looking for what brings us joy or pleasure.

To encourage feelings of gratitude, try writing down one thing you are grateful for each day. Or try writing a thank you note to someone who has been helpful or kind.

Remember that the things you are grateful for may be big (like your loved ones) or small (like a sunny day). This practice brings the most benefit when done regularly.

Connecting with your culture

Connecting with your culture can be a source of great power and healing. Joining in cultural activities in your community, learning or practicing your ancestral language, or learning a new skill like drumming or beading can help you grow and connect with others.

If you have not been a part of these activities much in the past, you may feel shy or worried about joining now. But it is never too late to try new things.



You can also ask a friend or family member to join you if you don't want to go alone.

Check out your local or regional community centres and Facebook pages for upcoming events. As a bonus, many events have food and prizes available. You never know what you may gain by just showing up!

Prayer

Praying is another way to connect with something bigger than yourself, sometimes referred to as “a higher power”. Prayer can help bring a new perspective, focus on gratitude, and accept things outside of your control.

For many people, praying brings feelings of release, hope, peace, and calm. You can pray any time, anywhere. You can pray out loud or silently and for a short or longer time. There is no right or wrong way to pray.

Traditional healing and wellness practices

Traditional healing and wellness practices include many things like: ceremony, traditional medicines and foods, songs, dance, smudging, brushings, hunting and gathering, fasting, etc.

Traditional healing also includes seeking help from a traditional healer. They can help you heal a broken spirit, ill body, or keep well.



If you don't know about traditional healing practices but want to learn, ask a trusted person to share their experience or suggest resources.

"I see that everywhere I go – in Native communities. The power of family and the power of home and our ancestors."

"Wellness is remembering who we are - what it means to be Anishinaabe"



Body

Wiiyow (Physical)

Our being needs to be given the proper rest, exercise, food and water if we wish to be healed.

Taking care of your body is important when you have chronic pain. But chronic pain can make it hard to do that.

You may hesitate to move around when things hurt. Or you may have trouble sleeping and have low energy.

The good news is there are many different strategies you can try. And it's ok to try things out in small steps!

Movement for pain relief

One of the best ways to manage pain is through movement and physical activity. There are many different ways to make movement part of your day. A good way to start is by adding a bit more movement to your daily activities.

Here are some things to try:

- gentle arm and leg stretches while sitting
- moving around the house to your favourite music
- parking the car a bit farther from a store entrance
- doing some light chores inside or outside the house

Activities can be done alone, with a friend, or in a group. The most important thing is to find an activity that you enjoy doing. It's ok to start small and add a few minutes of movement each week, at your own pace.

Here are some activities that can help with chronic pain:

- gentle stretching or yoga
- walking
- dancing
- light gardening
- swimming
- strengthening muscles with small weights



Getting professional help with movement

Physiotherapists or occupational therapists are movement professionals. They work with you to find the activities and movements that support your body best.

Physiotherapy helps improve your movement, mobility, and function. A physiotherapist may do this using manual therapies, stretches, or exercises.

Occupational therapy helps you perform daily activities (like bathing and getting dressed). An occupational therapist helps you more easily keep your independence. They also help make your home environment better for your everyday life.

Physical strategies to ease pain

Here are some things that have helped people in your community manage their pain:

- applying a hot or a cold pack to the painful area
- electrical stimulation machine (TENS machine)
- getting a massage
- getting acupuncture
- seeing a chiropractor

Pacing yourself to prevent flare-ups

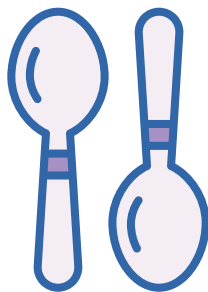
Chronic pain often comes and goes. On a good day you may feel like you should catch up on things. But then you may overdo it and the pain flare-ups afterwards.

To avoid this “boom and bust” cycle, it’s important to take breaks even when you feel like you can keep going.

Pacing involves breaking activities into smaller chunks and taking breaks in-between to avoid overdoing it.

People often talk about having a certain number of spoonfuls of energy per day. With activity, these spoonfuls get used up.

Through pacing, you can divide your spoonfuls of energy for the day by balancing activity and rest. This way you can get some things done each day without the fear of pain getting worse the next day.



Knowing your limits and balancing your energy each day can help you keep an active life despite pain.



Food is medicine for chronic pain

Keeping the body well-nourished is important for general health. It can also affect how your pain feels. But, it is not always easy to eat nutritious meals.

Colonial systems have made fresh and nutritious food hard to get or too expensive. Colonial policies have also disrupted Traditional food practices, like growing, gathering, hunting, and preserving food.

The best approach to eating well is to balance suggestions for nutritious foods with what is practical for you and your family.

Here are some practical tips for nutritious meals:

- By making your own meals at home, you can control how much sugar, salt, and oil or fat is in your food.
- When preparing meals at home, make extra portions to freeze and eat at a later time.
- Frozen fruits and veggies are as nutritious as fresh.
- Drink water throughout the day and try to eat foods with lots of water in them, like soups and fruits.

Some foods increase inflammation

Many kinds of chronic pain come with **inflammation**. It's your body's natural response to protect and heal itself. Inflammation can make your pain feel worse. Some foods increase inflammation while others reduce inflammation.

Foods that can increase inflammation:

- fried foods (French fries, potato chips)
- sugary drinks (pop)
- processed meat (hot dogs, sausages, lunch meats)

Foods that can reduce inflammation:

- green leafy vegetables like spinach and kale
- fruits like berries, apples, peaches, and cherries
- nuts like almonds and walnuts
- fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, tuna, and sardines

The benefits of traditional foods

Eating traditional foods can also help you stay healthy and manage pain. Traditional foods, like berries, fish, game meat, or wild rice are rich in nutrients. And eating these foods can help reduce inflammation and ease pain.

Eating traditional foods is also an opportunity to share traditional knowledge and practices.

Reclaiming traditional diets is a way to be more food secure. And it helps to prevent and treat chronic pain.



Find a link to the Traditional Food Guide on page 68 in the "Resources" section.

Sleep well to manage pain

Good quality sleep is important for well-being and helps with managing pain. But, getting enough good quality sleep can be hard when you live with chronic pain.

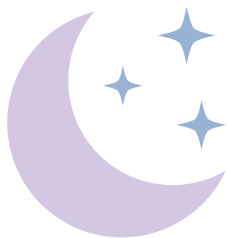
When pain shows up, it can make it hard to fall asleep and it can wake you up at night.

Fortunately, there are things you can do to improve your sleep.



Here are some things that may help you sleep better:

- go to bed and wake up around the same time each day
- read a book or have a bath before bed to relax
- try relaxation exercises before bed, like a guided meditation or listening to soothing music
- do some physical activity during the day
- avoid having a heavy meal or things with caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate) close to bedtime



It may take a bit of time and patience to figure out the best sleep time routine for you, so take it easy on yourself.

If you are not able to sleep, your body can still take advantage of this time to rest.

Pain medicines

There are different types of Western pain medicines that you can get over-the-counter at the pharmacy.

If you prefer to avoid Western medicines, there are traditional medicines that can ease pain.

Seek the advice of a trusted and respected healer in your community to learn more about traditional ways to relieve pain.



The most commonly used Western pain medicines are called anti-inflammatory medications. They help to reduce inflammation and help to relieve pain. These medications that you are probably familiar with are:

- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol)
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
 - ibuprofen (Advil)
 - naproxen sodium (Aleve)
 - celecoxib (Celebrex)



There are also creams, gels, and salves for pain relief that you can buy at the pharmacy or order online. Speak to your pharmacist to find out which over-the-counter medication and pain relief products are right for you.

If over-the-counter medications don't help with your pain, talk to a doctor about prescription pain medications.

See the section on “Medical Care for Chronic Pain” starting on page 52 to find out more.

Pain stories

Managing pain is unique to each person. Read about some ways that people in GCT#3 communities manage pain. These are real stories summarized to focus on key points and to protect privacy.



Managing osteoarthritis and severe back pain

I try to learn about herbals and medicines from the bush. I also read on the internet (for example, on Facebook) about what different foods do for your body and health (like berries, pineapple). I have a person that I talk to every month - to get all that stuff out. I also stay active by walking. And I avoid extreme cold - it makes my back spasm. If that happens, I take a hot bath.



Managing arthritis all over the body

Some days I can barely even walk. But I keep on fighting and trying to be strong. I try to smile, I try to make people happy. I do whatever I can to help and advocate for other people and for animals. I use my cane and I use massagers at home. I went to see a medicine man - the medicines and guidance he gave me have helped me out the most.



Managing back injuries after a car accident in their youth

I used to take Tylenol 3s for a long time. But I had to stop using them when I got pregnant and I didn't want to start using them again after... Now I see a physiotherapist and what has helped me the most is exercise, especially stomach exercises to support my back. I also use hot and cold pads, salves like tiger balm, and I drink a lot of teas. I also use a TENS machine when I have a flare up.

So now I only go the natural route. Even when I've gone in for surgeries, I turn down medications they prescribe me. I would just rather not take them. I know that if things get bad, that option is always there, but for now I just stick with what I know.



Managing chronic pain using different Traditional medicines

Going to the sweat lodge is a huge thing for me - it's a cleansing process and it targets everything, every part of you. I do a lot of walking and I do yoga. I use crystals and candles. I smudge. I've tried seeing a massage therapist, acupuncturist, reiki, chiropractor. Even just sitting with someone who knows about Traditional medicines - that's a biggie. I go swimming. I like to be in the sun, in nature, being in the bush and picking medicines. It's such a healing thing.

As soon as I start to get any feelings of sadness, I get up and I move. I make a medicine bag or smudge or sit with my tobacco and release what I'm feeling. I have learned how to honour myself and honour my body.



Managing back injury and trauma from residential school

The Elders helped take care of me and taught me about some of the medicines.

I went to a lot of sweats, ceremonies and healing - that also helped me a lot. For my back pain, I try to stay active and eat healthy - lots of fruits and vegetables and do whatever I can to take care of my body. I quit smoking. I saw a massage therapist. I try to remember what the Elders taught me and try to find a balance. I try to find what feels good for me.



Managing chronic pain and mental health issues

Before I could even deal with my pain, I had to take care of my mental health.

I did a lot of cultural things like going out in the bush, going to the water. Then, when I felt strong enough I started to listen to my body. I knew I had to lose weight. So now I walk every day, for an hour. I've lost 60 pounds already. My walking time is my time - my thinking time, my wellness time. Another thing I tried was talking to my doctor about cannabis use. I've also tried melatonin and turmeric and other anti-inflammatory things. I try different things - it's like an experiment thing for me. And I quit smoking.



Actions for Heart and Mind

HEART ACTIONS to Manage Pain:

- Spend time with family
- Call a friend
- Attend community events
- Visit with community members
- Make music or art
- Find an online support group or forum
- Support someone in your community
- Be gentle on yourself
- Write down your emotions in a journal

MIND ACTIONS to Manage Pain:

- Bring calm to the mind and body
- Relaxation, deep breathing
- Mindfulness practice
- Focus on the things that matter to you
- Learn about and use stress management techniques
- Talk to a psychologist, mental health therapist, counselor, or a trusted and respected Elder



Actions for Spirit and Body

SPIRIT ACTIONS to Manage Pain:

- Offer tobacco
- Pray
- Participate in Ceremony
- Practice gratitude
- Talk to a trusted Elder or Traditional Healer
- Drum, sing
- Connect with the land and water
- Learn or practice your ancestral language
- Take part in a cultural activity or event

BODY ACTIONS to Manage Pain:

- Movement, physical activity (exercise, dancing, stretches, yoga, physiotherapy, occupational therapy)
- Physical ways to relieve pain (hot or cold packs, massage, chiropractor, acupuncture, electrical stimulation machine)
- Nutrition (nourishing food, traditional foods, avoiding foods that cause inflammation)
- Sleep and rest (relaxation practices, pacing yourself)
- Medicines (Tylenol, Advil, muscle relaxants, creams, salves, Traditional medicines)



Setting goals

Setting goals can help you take steps towards doing the things that matter most to you.

To start setting your goal for living well, ask yourself:

- ~ What is most important to me?
- ~ What would I like to do more of?
- ~ What would I like to improve?
- ~ How can I balance heart, mind, body, and spirit?

Some common goals include taking care of yourself, spending more quality time with family, participating in community activities or hobbies, or getting back to work.

"But each day, I kept pushing myself. One minute...I did 10 steps. Another week, I was already going down the steps. Next week, I was going down... by the road. Each day I...was determined. You know, I kept making those... goals for myself."



TIPS for goal setting

Setting goals for living well will help you stay motivated and track your progress.

The easiest way to achieve your goals is to start small. You may need to break down a big goal into smaller goals or steps.



A good way to start is by setting “SMART” goals. Here is an example of turning a general goal into a SMART goal:



General goal: *My goal is to walk more.*



SMART goal: *My goal is to be able to walk from my house to my grandson's house at the other side of the reserve by the end of the summer (in three months).*

Next, you can start to plan HOW you will achieve your goal. You can plan WHAT actions you will do, WHEN you will do them, and for how long.

WHAT I will do: *I will walk outside for 5 minutes every day for two weeks. Then I will walk for 10 minutes every day for two week.*

WHEN I will do this: *I will walk in the morning after breakfast.*

Next, think about what will help you achieve your goal and what may get in your way. Here are some examples:

WHAT will help me: *I will invite a friend to walk with me. I will get a good pair of walking shoes.*

WHAT may get in the way: *If the weather is bad, I will walk around inside the house.*

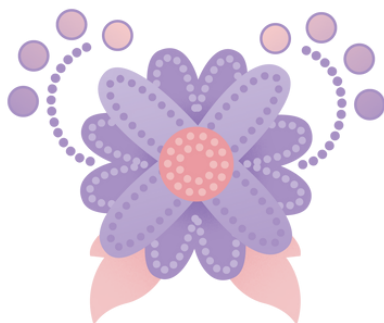
Your goals may change over time.

If you have a goal that you tried but did not yet achieve, you may need to change it. You could try making the goal smaller, giving yourself more time to achieve it, or changing the steps needed to achieve the goal.

It's ok if progress is slow. Every small step towards a goal is worth celebrating.

It's helpful to review your goals and your progress towards your goals with your healthcare provider.

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





Taking each day as it comes

It is common for chronic pain to flare up or feel worse on some days than others.

Sometimes you may know the reason why (like bad weather or overdoing it), but other times you may not. If you are having a worse pain day, it is helpful to remember that this is normal and it will pass.

It can be helpful to make a plan ahead of time for worse pain days.

Try making a list of things that helped you feel better in the past or were a good distraction from how you were feeling. Here are some things that often help others:

- hot or cold pack
- soothing music or guided relaxation
- warm shower or bath
- distracting book, movie, or game
- talking with a friend or a loved one

Having a plan to cope with worse pain days can give you peace of mind and might even help prevent a bad flare up.

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.

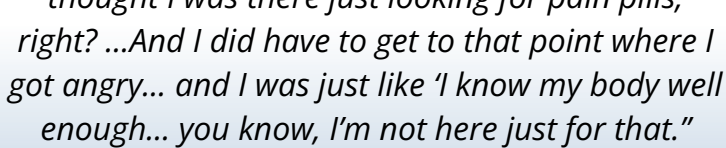
"it takes a lot for somebody to walk through that door to even go ask for help"





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.

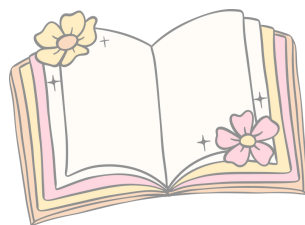
Keep in mind that each person's chronic pain condition is unique, so they may need different tests and treatments.

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.

For helpful tips, see “Setting Goals” on page 48 in the “Managing Chronic Pain” section.



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?

Meegwetch for reading this toolkit.
We hope that it will be helpful on your journey
towards living well with chronic pain.



Links to helpful internet resources

Below is a list of internet links to helpful resources. Just type or copy each link into the internet browser on your computer or mobile device to access the resource.

Chronic pain resources on the GCT#3 website:

- gct3.ca/social/health/chronic-pain

Learn more about managing chronic pain:

- poweroverpain.ca
- tapmipain.ca

Learn more about opioid medications:

- <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/opioids.html>
- https://www.ismp-canada.org/opioid_stewardship/

WAASEGIIZHIG NANAANDAWE'IYEWIGAMIG:

Traditional Food Guide

- tinyurl.com/5axpz6ax

Resources for caregivers:

- ontariocaregiver.ca/resources-for-indigenous-caregivers/#Education

Learn more about you rights as a patient:

- canadianhealthadvocatesinc.ca



Contacts for mental health support

National & Regional:

Talk 4 Healing

1-855-554-HEAL | Service in multiple languages
www.beendigen.com/programs/talk4healing

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line

24 hours a day, 7 days a week | In multiple languages
1-855-242-3310
www.hopeforwellness.ca

NWAC Elder Support Line (Canada-wide)

Monday-Friday 9:00am-11:00am EST & 1:00pm-3:00pm EST
1-888-664-7808

In Your Community:

Crisis Response Services | 1-866-888-8988

Fort Frances Tribal Area Health Services Crisis Line

Monday-Friday 8:30am-10:30pm | 1-807-271-0212
www.fftahs.com

All Nations Health Partners Helpline

Service in Anishinaabemowin | 1-807-464-3588
Service in English | 1-807-444-2219
www.anhp.net

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***"I do call it a journey because
it's learning about yourself and
learning how to adapt to that pain."***