



Managing Chronic Back Pain

PAIN MANAGEMENT

Most back pain clears up in a few weeks to months. For some individuals, however, the pain becomes a constant that interferes with daily life. Chronic back pain is unremitting pain that lasts at least six months and is not relieved by standard treatments. If ignored, can lead to:

- Depression
- Disturbed sleep
- Poor balance
- Withdrawal from physical and social activities
- Inability to work
- Reduced quality of life

The first step in relieving chronic back pain is careful medical evaluation by a doctor. He or she will assess the nature and degree of the pain and, if possible, pinpoint the cause. Because pain is a subjective experience, the doctor will ask question that include:

- When and how often the pain occurs?
- What brings it on and how long it lasts?
- The pain's location, intensity and quality (for example, is it sharp, dull or tingling?)
- What treatments you have tried and how well they have worked?

You may also be asked to rate your level of pain on a standard pain scale.

If your doctor is not able to identify a specific cause for the pain, a variety of medications may be tried. The medications likely include:

- Over-the-counter drugs
 - Acetaminophen
 - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- Prescriptions
 - Antidepressants
 - Muscle relaxants
 - Opioids

Doctor may suggest other measures to help with the pain, such as:

- Weight loss (if necessary) and exercise (flexibility, stretching, and muscle-strengthening)
- Tai chi
- Applying heat and cold packs
- Cognitive and/or behavioral therapy
- Spinal manipulation
- Acupuncture
- Acupressure
- Massage
- Progressive relaxation (tensing and then relaxing the affected muscles)
- Electromyography biofeedback (a method of retraining tense muscles by using feedback from sensors placed on the skin)
- Mindfulness stress reduction
- Motor-control exercise (focused on restoring coordination, control, and strength of muscles supporting the spine)
- Low-level laser therapy

If these measures fail to help relieve the pain, your doctor may advise you to enroll in a pain treatment program.

Pain treatment facilities

Thousands of pain treatment facilities in the United States offer programs for people with chronic pain, including back pain. The goal of such programs is not to cure the cause of pain. Rather, they take advantage of a variety of approaches to reduce or eliminate pain and its negative effects on daily life. This can help even when cure of the condition is not possible or will take a lot of time.

People generally turn to pain treatment facilities when they have run out of other options. These facilities can help people living with chronic pain improve both their physical and mental coping skills. The programs focus on managing the following:

- Pain behavior—actions that worsen the quality of life
- Self-perception—perceiving oneself as impaired or having a disability
- Pain perception—a discrepancy between how much pain a person feels and how much pain the condition typically produces
- Mental health problems—depression, anxiety, drug or alcohol dependence and impaired memory or concentration

There are several types of pain facilities. Some focus on a single treatment method, such as acupuncture. Others target pain in a particular region of the body. Doctors often prefer multidisciplinary pain centers or clinics because they offer a more comprehensive approach. Multidisciplinary centers view pain as a complex syndrome. Therefore, they provide an integrated treatment team that generally includes a:

- Primary care physician
- Surgeon
- Psychologist or psychiatrist
- Nurse
- Physical therapist
- Occupational therapist
- Vocational counselor
- Social worker

The quality of care varies from one program to another. Finding the right one for you can take some time. Your physician may be able to recommend a facility, or you can contact the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, which will provide a list of accredited programs in your area. Although accreditation is not required, accredited programs tend to be comprehensive. Some insurance plans cover only accredited facilities. The American Pain Society also can provide information about pain centers in your vicinity.

The following tips may be helpful in your search:

- Programs located in hospitals and rehabilitation centers are most likely to offer comprehensive treatment. These are often located in a separate unit specifically set aside for the pain program.
- A good chronic pain program should include most of the following features:
 - Biofeedback training
 - Individual and family counseling
 - Group therapy
 - Occupational therapy
 - Assertiveness training

- Nerve blocks
- Physical therapy
- Relaxation training and stress management

- Educational programs on medication and other aspects of pain management
- Follow-up care after program completion
- Make sure the program encourages family involvement. Educational sessions and counseling for your family members can help them better understand your pain and how to support you.
- Find out what services your health insurer will reimburse.
- Try to meet with several staff members before you enter a program. The medical director should have board certification and training in pain management. Ask about the physical setup, whether the program is inpatient or outpatient, the duration of the program (and length of any inpatient stay) and whether job retraining is involved. You may also consider asking whether any current participants would be willing to speak to you about their experience.

Be sure the program reviews your previous medical records and gives you a complete physical exam before entry. Bring copies of your recent medical records.

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