

PAIN MANAGEMENT

ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



Sometimes the cause of pain such as a broken bone is obvious. Other times the cause is less clear, especially if pain is in areas that can't be seen, such as the back. Healthcare professionals often talk about acute, chronic pain and recurrent pain, which people with arthritis can experience at different times.

Acute Pain

Acute pain is usually due to something obvious such as a sprain, broken bone or injury. Once the injury has mended, the pain will go away within hours, days or weeks. Acute pain can be useful because it can mean that something is wrong and that we need to tend to a part of the body, taking action to allow it to heal, such as rest. Acute pain usually responds well to simple treatments or painkillers.

Chronic Pain

Chronic is a type of pain which doesn't go away after several months or years, even though the body has had time to heal. There may not be an obvious cause for the pain. Chronic pain is much more difficult to treat than acute pain and sometimes may not respond to treatment such as painkillers.

Recurrent pain

Recurrent pain is pain which comes and goes, such as the pain of knee osteoarthritis. Many people with arthritis have good days and bad days.

For people with arthritis, joints can be painful for several reasons. If the tissues around a joint are damaged, for example if there is swelling in a joint, there can be *inflammatory* pain. If small nerves around a joint are affected, the pain is called *neuropathic* pain. Sometimes, pain signals from nerves around a joint can continue to send messages to the brain and the pain nerves can then become oversensitive.

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If this happens, even though the original issue in the joint may have mended, there may still be pain because the pain-detecting areas in the brain and pain nerves are still active, a phenomenon called *central sensitization*. This is similar to what can happen to people who feel pain in amputated limbs, called “phantom limb pain”, where pain can be felt in an area, although there is no limb in which to feel pain.

Interestingly, the pain-detecting areas of the brain are connected with parts of the brain which affect sleep and emotions, which may be why people with chronic pain commonly report feeling low or anxious, or may have disturbed sleep. When pain affects sleep and emotions, this can in turn make the pain worse.

It is not fully understood why some people develop chronic pain and others don't. However, it is appreciated that the emotional effects of chronic pain can be much greater than acute pain, affecting many areas of life. Chronic pain can be unpredictable and frustrating as it can make planning for life events difficult. It can also lead to feelings of isolation, as people may try to hide their feelings and pain from friends or loved ones.

Managing the pain of Arthritis

People living with arthritis may, at different times, experience acute pain, chronic pain or recurrent pain.

Those with inflammatory arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis can experience sudden acute “flare-ups” of pain, stiffness and swelling in single or many joints which can last a few days or even more. Sometimes, a flare-up can lead to feeling more tired, or generally unwell, than usual.

Those with osteoarthritis can also experience temporary worsening of pain and stiffness, sometimes after activity, but this is usually in single joints such as the knee, hip or thumbs.

Underlying these acute attacks can be more persistent, chronic pain and stiffness in the joints.

There's no *one* way to manage the pain of arthritis. It may involve prescription or non-prescription medicines, but there are lots of things that you can do to help yourself.

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Acute pain flare-ups

Sometimes acute injuries or flares affecting single joints can be helped by remembering the word **RICE**.

R stands for rest and relaxation- try resting the affected joint for a while but make sure that once the pain has eased that you resume your normal activities because too much rest can cause muscles to become weaker and then joints can become stiffer.

I stands for ice. Try wrapping something cold such a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a tea towel round a painful joint. Some people find that heat works better though so just experiment and see what works for you.

C stands for compression. Sometimes a soft support such as an elastic bandage or splint can help a painful joint but these should not be used for long periods as they can lead to muscle weakness around joints. They should never be used on swollen areas or joints without seeking advice as too much compression can affect the circulation and nerves and cause damage.

E stands for elevation. If you have a painful hip, knee or ankle, sometimes raising the joint onto a low stool when sitting down, for example, can help. It is important to only do this for short periods because muscles can become weaker very quickly and this can lead to more stiffness and pain.

Managing chronic pain

Chronic pain is sometimes difficult to manage because it involves many other factors aside from pain, such as worries about the future, low mood, memory problems, feeling overwhelmed or out of control, lack of mobility, social isolation, relationship difficulties, and sleep problems. Emotional factors and poor sleep can then make the pain worse and it can be hard to break the vicious cycle.

Knowing how to better manage your pain means trying to get to know the things that make your pain feel worse, which can also help you to understand what might make the pain feel better. If you feel more in control of some of these pain triggers, then you are likely to feel more in control of your pain and your outlook may also improve.

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Things that can increase pain

Worries

Poor sleep

Feeling low

Inactivity and immobility

Doing too much on a good day – poor pacing

Dwelling on pain or worrying about the meaning of pain

Things that reduce pain

Relaxation

Distraction - hobbies, music

Gentle exercise or stretching

Meditation or mindfulness

Physical therapies

Deep breathing

Things that can help chronic pain

Emotional factors

Some people find that distraction technique such as reading a book, listening to music or doing something fun can help with pain. Others find that therapies that focus on the pain such as mindfulness can help. Talking therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) may help you cope better with pain, by changing the way you think about it. Improving your sleep can make pain seem more manageable. Learning some meditation techniques, relaxation and deep breathing can also help with pain and sleep. Setting yourself some small and achievable goals may help give you some direction.

Physical factors

Many people worry that exercise will harm the joints, but this is not true. You cannot damage your joints with exercise! If anything, it is inactivity which can make joint pain feel worse. If you are new to exercise, or have not exercised for a while, you should seek medical advice before starting to exercise, and you should start slowly with a graded exercise programme. Exercise can release natural pain-killing chemicals called endorphins, improve sleep and mood and can also improve fitness and self-esteem.

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It is important that you don't rush into exercise and that you try to pace your activities, as doing too much on a good day can make your pain feel worse ("boom and bust"). Physical therapies such as physiotherapy, acupuncture or osteopathy may also help.

Medication

Medication may not be very helpful for chronic pain and many people naturally want to take as few tablets as possible, however painkilling tablets can sometimes help you cope better with pain, and can help you stay active -or join in important events - so that you will feel less isolated. If you are taking tablets to help with pain, you are very unlikely to become addicted to these medicines. Some medicines can be effective for nerve pain and others can improve sleep to help you cope better. (For more information on this, please see our other Factsheet - Medication and Arthritis). If you are depressed, you may lack the energy to help yourself deal with the pain, and may find medication to help with your mood helpful.