

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Living with chronic pain

Walking up stairs, bending over, reaching for an item on the top shelf—many of us don’t think twice about these small everyday tasks, but for some they are big hurdles. For people living with chronic pain, the ordinary can cause extraordinary suffering and daily life can become a struggle. Even visiting friends or going to dinner can create anxiety, as the prospect of steep stairs or pain-inducing activities seems daunting or risky. According to a report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) 100 million Americans suffer from chronic pain at a cost of around $600 billion a year in medical treatments and lost productivity. If you are grappling with chronic pain or know of someone who is, there are ways to minimize its impact on both physical and emotional health.

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain has the following characteristics:

- Lasts at least three months, past the point of healed injury
- Intermittent (follows a pattern) or persistent (lasting more than 12 hours daily)
- Usually results from a known cause, such as surgery, arthritis or osteoarthritis
- Can be caused by abnormal processing of pain by the nervous system

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If you have chronic pain, there are many non-medicinal and medicinal treatment options that may help you manage the pain.

Non-medicinal options

Massage. Visiting a professional massage therapist or having a friend or partner massage you at times when you feel anxious or before the usual times when pain is the worst can provide some relief.

Hot or cold. Applying hot or cold compresses can relieve certain types of chronic pain. Heat is better for cramping or aching muscles from exercise or a buildup of lactic acid, while cold reduces swelling and inflammation from injury.

Topical creams. Topical analgesic creams can sometimes offer relief from backache or arthritic pain.

Exercise. When movement of the body triggers pain, the natural impulse is to avoid it as much as possible. But regular exercise can help you build strength and endurance. Starting very slowly and balancing rest with activity is crucial to success. Exercises like swimming or Tai Chi are gentle and low-impact options while yoga can help the body relieve pain through the natural releasing of endorphins—your body's natural painkillers.

Posture. How you carry yourself during daily activities, especially at work, plays an important role in pain prevention. Create a safe work station and:

- Sit with your knees even with or lower than your hips.
- Make sure your feet touch the floor when sitting. If your chair is too high for this, get a foot rest.
- Sit and stand up straight! Your mom was right: ensure your hips are in line with your shoulders and that you're not hunched over.
- Adjust your chair so your elbows are at a 90 degree angle and your wrists are in a neutral position. Also, invest in a back support pillow.
- If you sit at a computer, ensure the monitor is at eye level so you don't have to strain your neck by tilting your head up or down.

Alternative therapies. More and more healthcare professionals are beginning to acknowledge the benefits of alternative therapies as part of their patients' journey to a pain-free (or at least pain-reduced) existence. This can include: acupuncture, acupressure, meditation and bio-feedback—a process which helps patients control the body's physical stress response and discover a relaxed state that can often alleviate chronic pain. How these various therapies work and their overall effectiveness is still a matter of public debate, but there are definitely people who find some relief from them.

Medicinal options

Over-the-counter medication, such as acetaminophen, can help control mild pain while moderate to severe pain treatments such as codeine may require a doctor's prescription. Discuss treatment options with your doctor and/or pharmacist and ensure prescriptions and the use of over-the-counter drugs are monitored for compatibility.

Help make conversations with healthcare professionals more productive by:

- **Keeping a diary** of when you feel pain, what type of sensations you feel and their effects. Remember, you know your body better than anyone else.
- **Rating your pain** on a scale of one to 10, zero being no pain and 10 being the worst.
- **Keeping a list** of both medicinal and non-medicinal treatments you've already tried.
- **Bringing a friend or relative** with you to make sure you don't miss anything important during your visit.
- **Remembering your rights.** You can choose to forego treatment options and you have the right to regular reassessments and adjustments when your current treatment is not giving you enough relief.

Seeking support

Managing chronic pain can already leave you feeling isolated from activities and others; but you don't have to go it alone. By connecting with others in a similar situation and leaning on loved ones for emotional support, you'll build invaluable ties that can keep you in the know about new or emerging resources and also help you maintain or build vital bonds.

Try tapping into:

Chronic pain support groups. These groups give you the unique chance to meet, and share experiences and knowledge about treatment options. Find out about the groups meeting in your area and connect with others who understand your experience and want to find solutions. Many groups are involved in advocating for research and education and your involvement will make a difference in the treatment of chronic pain down the line. Most importantly, this kind of group is a reminder that you are not alone in your journey to manage chronic pain.

On-the-job resources. If chronic pain is hindering your performance at work, discuss possible accommodations that can be made with your manager or leader to make your work environment more comfortable. You may also wish to contact your Human Resources Department to see what tools and resources are available to you to help you better manage your condition and any associated stress it may cause.

Help at home. Be honest about your physical limitations and don't feel guilty about asking for help when you need it. Remember: if your condition has recently developed, loved ones may also need some support to understand the physical and emotional impact chronic pain will have on everyone's lives.

Helping a loved one cope

Side-line the stigma. Educate yourself and others about chronic pain so they truly understand the impact it has on your loved one's life. Also be sure to offer a compassionate ear to your loved one when needed. It may be challenging sometimes, especially if your loved one isn't in the best of moods. Show empathy: remind yourself about a time you had a miserable cold, flu or other illness and remember that your sibling, friend or spouse is living in a perpetual state of feeling unwell—no easy task.

Extend a helping hand. Chronic pain sufferers may also find it difficult to cope with the reality that they cannot do all of the things they may have been able to do in the past. As a friend, partner or family member of a person with limited mobility, you can help by offering to assist with physical tasks, such as mowing the lawn, cleaning floors, or tagging along on a grocery trip.

Ask for help too. Remember: if you are a primary caregiver for a person with chronic pain, you can't do it all by yourself. Don't let yourself burn out. Seek out help from a support group, look at care options—including caregiver relief or respite programs—and make sure you maintain activities outside of the home and an active social life.

Even though chronic pain is widespread and impacts every aspect of the sufferer's life, including relationships with family and friends, it's widely misunderstood. But by utilizing available resources and maintaining an open dialog with healthcare providers to effectively manage your pain, you'll improve the quality of life for yourself or a loved one, better manage your physical and emotional health and help to make the "culture of silence" around chronic pain a thing of the past.