

Healthy ageing & lifestyle

Fact Sheet No.8

Pain: Part 2

Management of Pain

How you manage your pain will be a personal choice that is governed by your specific circumstances, and depending on your level of disability or long-term condition, you may have endured some pain for months, years or even decades; and in that time, you may have become resigned to living with such pain on a more or less permanent basis.

There is growing concern in the UK about the number of people becoming dependent on painkilling drugs, now estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, and this development is putting a tremendous strain on the drug budgets of GP Surgeries. It is also causing some reluctance among GPs to prescribe certain painkilling medicines on a long-term basis, and they may wish to employ a strategy of reducing dosages (gradually) in conjunction with the use of alternative therapies.

Seeking medical assistance

Your GP should be the first port of call, though you may have discussed pain issues with other healthcare professionals that you have come into contact with. A GP will probably prescribe a course of painkillers in the first instance, but if the pain is persistent and / or increasing in severity then perhaps a referral to a specialist or a Pain Clinic will be made. One of the GPs at your surgery may have a special interest or additional qualification in pain management, and if that is the case, it might well be the best option for you and could save trips to your local District General Hospital (DGH).

In addition to conventional medicines, there are many alternative therapies which help to control pain e.g. acupuncture – these therapies will be discussed in Part 3 but be warned, most are not prescribed under the NHS and will incur a cost to you. Again, this could be discussed with your GP.

Top Tip: If you rely on your GP surgery to manage your pain, it is important that you see the same GP so that your medication is not changed frequently and in an ad hoc way. Monitoring of your progress is vital and results are most reliable when your treatment is consistent.

Pain clinics

Referral to a pain clinic can be made via your GP, but not all District General Hospitals run pain clinics; and the services offered will vary, but may include:

- Assessing your pain
- Devising an individual programme
- Prescribing medications or giving injections
- Monitoring progress
- Giving advice on living life with pain
- Psychology sessions: either one to one or group sessions.

Exploring ways to use self-help to manage pain

Top Tip

Keep a diary. The very thought of writing a daily or weekly diary may seem tedious and time consuming but the benefits soon become obvious when you look back to see what progress has been made or where improvements might be achieved.

Self-help books: The shelves of book shops often appear to be groaning under the weight of self-help books, be careful before you splash your cash.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): can help you manage chronic pain by changing your attitude, beliefs and behaviour in relation to your pain. There are many books available to help you work through this process yourself, or you can consult a qualified professional.

Exercise: exercise can be of massive benefit, especially to help strengthen muscles, increase flexibility and help improve balance.

Top tip

If you need ideas for exercising safely, try More Life Health Seniors on YouTube. You will be guided through exercises by a physiotherapist which can be performed while sitting on a chair.

Nutrition: Stay well hydrated and eat a well-balanced diet that includes plenty of fruit and vegetables, to provide sufficient protein. Maintaining a steady weight is important too.

Mindfulness

We hear this word a lot these days but what does it really mean on a practical level? Here is one definition by Vidyamala Burch: “live in the moment, notice what is happening and make choices in how you respond to your experience rather than being driven by habitual reactions”

If you wish to explore mindfulness further, with a view to helping manage your chronic pain, a good place to start is mindfulness-based pain and illness management (MBPM), a system developed by ‘Breathworks’ – <https://www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk>

Distraction ideas

What works for one person will not necessarily work for another as there are many ways of distracting oneself from intermittent and constant pain, it's very much an individual thing. Also, what works for you initially may wear thin and you might find yourself changing direction. The most obvious and easy distractions include music, which is very powerful in this respect, but why not try a different genre so that you really have to concentrate on it. The TV and radio can play a useful role too and again, why not try a different channel or topic to your regular favourites. We now know that keeping a pet can have a positive effect on health and well-being, especially as stroking your pet will release feel good hormones, which in turn can help to reduce pain.

Going out to work, whether paid or voluntary, is very valuable if you are able to get out easily; if this doesn't cause you anxiety.

Getting out of the house. Suggestions from people to join a club etc can be interpreted as a bit glib, they may not fully understand why it is difficult for you to get out and about to take part in activities e.g. finances, mobility constraints and no-one available to go with you.

Sleep

Good quality sleep is a very important factor when coping with chronic pain. Pain can disturb sleep and always being tired can compromise the immune system, it's very easy to enter into a downward spiral. Taking a nap in the afternoon may be a beneficial and is certainly not something to feel apologetic about. Again, there is a large range of support available, perhaps starting with your GP.

The Sleep Council: <https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/>



Relationships

It is perfectly understandable that you might not want to be bothered with friends or extended family members when you are in pain and feeling tired. Also, If you can avoid negative, non-supportive individuals then so much the better. Remaining intimate with your partner can improve your feeling of well-being.

Quality of life

Quality of life encompasses physical, emotional, financial and social well-being, all of which we strive to achieve and maintain. Living with pain, especially as we age, can have a serious impact on all of these areas, but with the right support systems in place and the appropriate medication, it is usually possible to keep pain levels under control; allowing us to 'carry on regardless.'

The final fact sheet on pain will discuss 'Alternative Therapies' for pain relief.

Disclaimer

The information and opinions shared on this website are based on my personal experience of working in the health sector and research I have carried out whilst writing articles; it is of a general nature and should not be used as a substitute for seeking medical advice. My aim is to ensure that this information is accurate and kept up to date, but you should always consult the appropriate healthcare professionals if you have a concern about your health.

Jan 2021