

Healthy ageing & lifestyle

Fact Sheet No.7

Pain

What is pain?

Pain is the body's way of telling us something is wrong and is a normal part of life in our advancing years, but we should be wary, sometimes we automatically attribute a new ache or pain to the ageing process and it is a risky strategy, we could easily be ignoring the early signs of a developing disease.

Pain is generally described as acute or chronic and is a very individual experience, with varying levels of tolerance and acceptance.

The difference between acute and chronic pain: acute pain might be classified as lasting for less than 12 weeks e.g. when you cut yourself with a knife or burn yourself whilst cooking. Whereas chronic pain can be classified as lasting for more than 12 weeks, which persists, despite an apparent lack of ongoing injury (reference: International Association for the Study of Pain).



Some conditions which contribute to chronic pain are arthritis, back pain, cancers, fibromyalgia.

If you are living with chronic pain, you may be at risk of:

- Neglecting personal care
- Falls
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Sleep deprivation
- Changes in cognitive function
- Isolation

What can make pain worse

If you have become intolerant to pain killing drugs after years of use

Anxiety

Depression

Fatigue

Illness and infections

Psychological factors

How pain changes

You may experience a reduction in pain as you age, especially if you have been able to develop coping techniques; conversely, you may experience an increase in the intensity and duration of pain. Long term use of some drugs can result in a degree of intolerance, but with advances in analgesic therapy, different drugs or combinations of drugs can be prescribed as an alternative; so never give up hope of finding a regime that suits you.

Top tip

Keeping notes while regularly monitoring your pain will help you and health professionals to understand how and when any changes occur.

It's a fact of life, as you age, that you will likely start to notice aches, pains and stiffness in your joints; particularly in the mornings. Neck, shoulder and back pain may develop partly as a result of arthritis (osteoarthritis and / or rheumatoid arthritis) and changes in posture. Knee joints may be feeling the strain too.

How pain can change personalities

Chronic pain can affect your mental health, and this may result from the gradual negative aspects of living with such pain.

Has chronic pain affected your relationships? Not just with those closest to you but on a wider level. Do you feel like 'grumpy old man' or 'grumpy old woman'? Do you feel people perceive you in this way? Some people consider themselves to be a burden on their family and friends and this can result in withdrawal, both in yourself and the wider world. If your level of dependence on others has increased, this feeling can be re-enforced and result in loneliness and isolation.

It can be difficult for other people to understand how chronic pain affects you personally and it might seem like nobody takes the time to try to understand, which can leave you feeling hurt and disillusioned.

You may start to turn down social invitations and friends may trickle away.

Has living with pain prevented you from working or did you decide to take early retirement, thereby reducing your income and standard of living? It can be easy to lose your sense of

self when your circumstances change, particularly if you feel you have lost some social and economic standing with family and colleagues.

Do you feel that healthcare professionals have given up on you, or in other words you feel abandoned by the NHS?

Recognising altered behaviours, mood swings and negative feelings is the first step to dealing with them. You may experience an anger about your disability, even after many years.

The next fact sheet deals with managing your pain.

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.

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