

Taking control of chronic pain

What can I do to help my chronic pain?

50 million Americans live with chronic pain every day. That's 1 in 5 people! Chronic pain – which should be evaluated by a doctor – is pain that doesn't go away after 3 months. But there's hope! Many people can lower the intensity of their pain enough to get back to the things they need and want to do.

1

Move your body.

Movement could reduce pain's intensity and its impact on your life. Try some gentle stretching or walking 3 to 5 times a week, for 30 minutes. Talk to your doctor about what kinds of exercise are safe for you. And while you're getting active, avoid sitting still for too long. Changing your position every 45 minutes and correcting your posture can help prevent pain.

2

Change what you eat.

Some foods help your body reduce inflammation, which is a common cause of chronic pain. Eat fruits like berries, pineapples, and cherries; nuts, such as pecans or walnuts; and veggies like broccoli, tomatoes, and spinach. Try fatty fish, like salmon or tuna, and use olive oil when cooking or in salad dressing. Also, eat less sugar, processed foods (like packaged chips), and fast food because they can increase inflammation and chronic pain.

3

Get more sleep.

Getting enough sleep can lessen your pain. 7-9 hours per night, on a regular daily schedule, is best. If you have trouble sleeping, start by drinking less caffeine and alcohol, and turning off electronics, like TVs or phones, an hour before bed. All of those can interfere with sleep. Tell your doctor if your pain is disturbing your sleep.

4

Check in on your mental health.

Our bodies and minds are strongly connected. Physical pain and emotional pain—such as depression or trauma—share some of the same pathways in the brain and nervous system. Depression makes pain worse, and pain makes depression worse. Treating depression through counseling, medicine, or both, can help with physical pain. If you think your mental health adds to your pain, talk to your doctor about it.

5

Try meditating.

Mindfulness meditation is a way to relax your mind and change how you experience sensations- even pain. It takes some time to learn, but in one study, people who stuck with meditation lowered the amount of pain medication they needed by three-quarters!

6

Connect with people you like.

Research shows that spending time with friends and other people who support you can make a real difference in chronic pain. These social connections are especially important for people who have emotional or mental health issues that make their pain worse. Think about those specific people who make you feel good and healthy. Try taking a walk with a friend a couple times a week!

7

Be your own advocate.

You need and deserve quality medical care, but remember that you are the true expert of your body, your pain, and your experience. You know what healthy habits make you feel more functional, and you know what makes you feel worse. Share this knowledge with your providers and ask questions.

8

Be a community advocate.

Making sure people have a place to buy healthy food and a safe place to walk requires changes in policy. You can advocate for these kinds of changes! Talk to your representatives in local government. Write letters and call your Congresspeople. Connect with others who also advocate for change.

