

Voices 4 Youth in Pain

Chronic Pain in Students: A Quick Reference for School Nurses

What Is Chronic Pain?

Chronic pain is a chronic illness related to pain that persists for weeks, months, or even years. It can affect children and adolescents physically, emotionally, socially, and academically.

 **Chronic pain is typically defined as pain lasting 3 months or more and affects 1 in every 4-5 child or adolescent in the United States.**

Common Causes of Chronic Pain in Youth

- Migraines or chronic headaches
- Juvenile Fibromyalgia (also known as chronic primary widespread musculoskeletal pain)
- Chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS)
- Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)
- Musculoskeletal or nerve pain
- Gastrointestinal issues (e.g., IBS)
- Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS)
- Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS)
- Post-viral syndromes (e.g., post-COVID conditions, Lyme Disease)
- Juvenile arthritis or autoimmune conditions

 **Pain may not always have a visible cause—but it is still real.**

Signs a Student May Be Experiencing Chronic Pain

- Frequent nurse visits or absenteeism
- Changes in mood, social withdrawal, poor academic performance, or irritability

- Difficulty concentrating (“brain fog”)
 - Avoiding physical activities
 - Complaints of fatigue or sleep issues
 - Sensitivity to noise, light, or touch
 - Discomfort sitting in hard chairs or walking between classes
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How Can School Nurses Support Students?

Validation & Compassion

- Acknowledge the student’s pain and avoid minimizing their experience.
- Create a safe space for them to explain how they’re feeling.

Coordinate with 504/IEP and Healthcare Teams

- Ensure accommodations, both pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic tailored for the student, are understood and implemented
- Seek out clarification of healthcare recommendations from student’s healthcare providers if needed
- Help advocate for pain-related supports (see examples below).

Monitor & Support During the School Day

- Allow rest breaks or access to a quiet space
 - Preferred seating options in classrooms and provide flexible use of mobility aids approved by child’s healthcare provider
 - Permit use of heating pads, ice packs, or medication if authorized
 - Offer hydration and nutrition support for students with GI issues
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Common Accommodations for Chronic Pain

- Modified PE participation or alternate assignments
- Extra time between classes or elevator access

- Flexible deadlines and reduced homework load
 - Seating near the door or in a quiet area
 - Extended test time or breaks during testing
 - Access to a nurse's office, rest area, or cool-down space
 - Partial or full-day attendance modifications
 - Allowing use of fidget items, sensory tools, or noise-canceling headphones
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Mental Health Matters Too

Students with chronic pain are at increased risk for anxiety and depression. Supportive school environments can help reduce emotional distress.

 Listen, validate, and refer when necessary to school counselors or mental health services.

Collaborate & Communicate

Work closely with:

- Parents/guardians
 - Teachers and classroom aides
 - School counselors and special education teams
 - Outside healthcare providers (with consent)
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Final Thought

“You don’t have to see the pain to believe it.”

Your support can make a major difference in a student’s ability to feel safe, understood, and successful at school.
