

Chronic Pain

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is pain that recurs and lasts long term, which means that it lasts for months or even years. It can result from an injury or disease such as cancer, heart disease, or diabetes. Unlike acute pain, chronic pain lasts longer than the normal recovery time for an injury. Examples of chronic pain include back pain, arthritis pain, and migraine headaches.

How can chronic pain be treated?

Doctors will often prescribe medication to treat pain. For example, OxyContin is a drug that has been used to alleviate suffering in cancer patients. Some doctors use a technique called “rational polypharmacy” that involves using several medications—often opioids or opiates—to control chronic pain. Unfortunately, this technique doesn’t adequately take into account a person’s genetic predisposition to drug addiction. It may be best for patients with past substance abuse problems to seek other means of treating chronic pain.

Exercising is another way to manage chronic pain because it causes the body to release endorphins. Before exercising, you should check with your doctor or physical therapist to determine which types of exercise are appropriate. Choose exercises that you find enjoyable and that can become part of your daily schedule.

If you suffer from chronic pain, working the Twelve Steps can help you live with your condition. Step One asks you to admit that you are powerless to completely stop your pain. Step Two and Step Three help you turn your pain over to a Higher Power and seek aid from the resources around you. Through the Twelve Step program, you can maintain hope and realize that there are some measures you can take to control chronic pain. Such measures may include eating nutritious foods, learning breathing and relaxation techniques, stretching, getting adequate rest, and exercising.

Other techniques that may temporarily ease pain include massage, application of heat or cold to the site of the pain, and acupuncture.

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How do you treat chronic pain while in recovery?

Inform your doctor of your addiction history so that the doctor will be able to find the treatment option that will work best for you. In addition, if you are not already a member of one, you may want to join a Twelve Step support group. If you must take oral medication for pain, the group can act as a safeguard against painkiller addiction by helping you decide when medication is really needed. Without this support, you may take medication simply to relieve your anxiety.

Chronic-pain support groups may also prove beneficial. You can get advice and inspiration from others who suffer from chronic pain, share your frustrations, and discuss how to overcome limitations caused by chronic pain.

How can you find a doctor familiar with addiction?

If you don't already have a physician who understands addiction, make it a priority to find one. Do this before an urgent health problem arises. That way, you'll have time to ask your friends in your Twelve Step program for a physician reference and to search and screen doctors in your area.

When you first meet a potential doctor, feel free to ask questions to learn more about the doctor's credentials, background, and personality. Since it may be necessary to interview several doctors before you find a good match, you have the right to ask about a free or low-cost initial consultation.

Should you be concerned about using medications to treat chronic pain?

Many medications, both over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription (Rx), have mood-altering effects and could threaten your recovery. These medications not only may have addiction potential of their own, but also may lead to relapse and an eventual return to use.

As a person in early recovery, it's essential that you know more about medications than the average consumer. You need to be up front with both pharmacists and medical doctors about your addiction. Always read ingredient labels and warning labels on medicine packaging. Many OTC medications contain one or more ingredients that you should not be taking. Check both the active and inactive ingredients, as many contain alcohol as an "inactive" ingredient.

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If a medication that you should avoid is deemed medically necessary by your health care professional, notify your sponsor as well as your recovery team. Make a plan for use as well as a plan for discontinuing use.

Are there safe medications that won't threaten your recovery?

While some medications are mood altering and have a high potential for addiction, other medications are fairly safe for most people in recovery. If you have any questions regarding medication use during your recovery, please contact your physician and/or pharmacist.

Web resources

American Chronic Pain Association

This website provides links to other sites dealing with pain management, a list of books on specific types of pain, and information on ways to manage chronic pain.