

Understanding acute and chronic pain







Pain can be described in many ways including aching, throbbing, stabbing, pinching, tingling, tightness or heaviness. Pain can be acute (short-lived) or chronic (on-going). It's important to know which type you have because the treatment options are quite different.

What is acute pain?

Acute pain is your body's way of warning you that something is wrong. It comes on rapidly, lasts for a short time and then goes away. It is usually caused by something such as an injury (burn, cut, broken bone, a bee sting), infection, surgery or dental work.

The sort of treatment that you will need will depend on what is causing your pain, where it is located, how much it hurts and what is important to you.

Common treatments for acute pain

	Pain relief medications such as paracetamol can be useful for mild-to-moderate pain.
	Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, naproxen or diclofenac can help reduce swelling.
	A wrapped ice pack can help with swelling.
	A heat pack can help reduce stiffness.
	Bandages can be used to provide compression and support.
	Some complementary therapies such as acupuncture and TENS have been shown to be helpful in providing pain relief.

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is pain that is on-going. You live with and experience this type of pain daily and it last for three months or more. It can range from mild to severe, be constant, or come and go. Living with chronic pain can be hard work but many people with chronic pain get better and most lead normal lives.

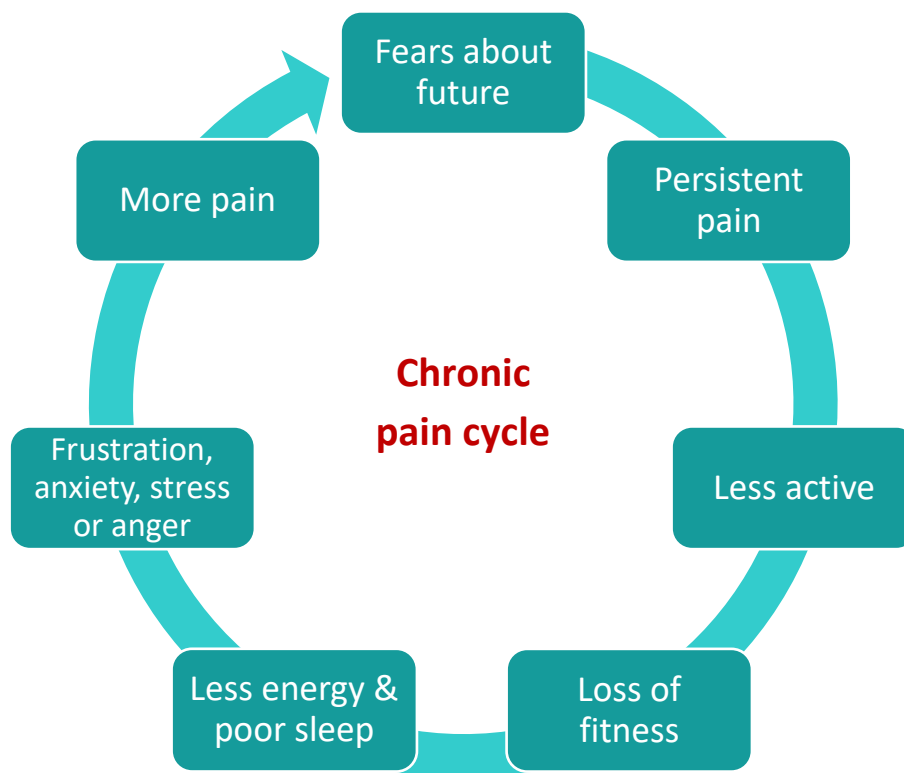
Chronic pain can be caused by conditions such as fibromyalgia and arthritis. It can also result from injuries that do not heal as expected.

Chronic pain occurs when nerves become over-sensitive and send warning messages to the brain even when there is no injury, or after the original injury causing pain has healed.

The brain thinks there is harm and reacts by feeling pain. In other words, 'The fire has been put out, but the fire alarm is still going off'.

The chronic pain cycle

Chronic pain is often described as a cycle, where persistent pain often leads to one doing less, which leads to loss of fitness, tiredness and less energy. This often leads to poor sleep, feelings of frustration, anxiety, low mood, stress, or anger, which results in increased pain. The increased pain then causes you to have more low mood, tiredness and stress, so you can get caught in an endless cycle as shown below.



The good news is that means there are several ways you can approach managing chronic pain and get back to your usual activities.

Treatment of chronic pain

Treatment of chronic pain needs a broad approach and takes into account your:

- ✓ Mental, physical and emotional needs.
- ✓ Successful treatment requires choosing a life-long plan of wellness.

See our brochures on treatment options for chronic pain or visit healthnavigator.org.nz/chronicpain for more information.

Learn more

For more health topics on pain, health conditions, medicines, videos and much more, visit www.healthnavigator.org.nz

If at any stage you need urgent medical advice, ring your doctor or Healthline 0800 611 116 straight away.



References

1. Helping patients cope with chronic non-malignant pain: it's not about opioids BPAC, 2014
2. The principles of managing acute pain in primary care BPAC, 2018