

Chronic pain and exercise

Why it Hurts! - Understanding Chronic Pain

Chronic pain refers to pain that extends beyond the expected healing time and includes conditions such as spinal pain, post-operative pain, neuropathic pain and shoulder and knee pain. In Australia, 1 in 5 individuals are affected by chronic pain to the point that pain significantly impacts on their daily life. One of the problems with treating chronic pain conditions is that many factors can contribute to 'how much it hurts' besides tissue injury. These include: thoughts and beliefs about physical activity, pain and injury; software glitches in the nervous system turning up the pain volume; low activity levels; fear of movement and increased anxiety about further injury/pain; previous pain memories; interactions with friends, family, work mates and therapists (therapists are very influential!); depression and anxiety disorder; unrealistic treatment expectations e.g. 'All I want is to be pain free'. The longer pain persists the more important these 'non tissue related factors' become in driving the cycle of pain and disability.

Motion is Lotion! – Exercise and Chronic Pain

The body and mind love movement and gradually becoming more active is essential for treating and managing chronic pain. Some benefits from exercise include: the joints get nice and lubricated and glide easier; some structures including the nerves and the discs of the spine need movement to get their nutrients and to be healthy; the nervous system winds down promoting relaxation; reduced flare-ups; improves mood and helps with anxiety and depression; increased pain tolerance after exercise, 'it hurts less'.

It is normal for people with chronic pain to experience discomfort/increased symptoms as they gradually become more active. Guidance with acceptable and non-acceptable pain can be very helpful and reassuring. There is no one optimal type of exercise for chronic pain, however exercise programs should be individualised, have a level of supervision which is generally higher at the start of treatment and be fun! Accredited Exercise Physiologists are trained in exercise prescription for chronic pain conditions. For some people, the stress imposed by chronic pain is beyond their ability to cope and consultations with a Clinical Psychologist experienced with pain management is beneficial. In some instances, a combined treatment approach involving a number of health professionals (e.g. GP, Psychologist, Pain Specialist, Exercise Physiologist, Physiotherapist, etc.) will be the best way forward.

Exercise Tips for Chronic Pain

- Choose exercise you enjoy. Weights, yoga, walking, swimming, etc. are all ok
- Consider some aerobic exercise in all programs (e.g. walking, swimming, etc.)
- Some discomfort with exercise is acceptable
- Avoid exercise which causes pain to continually increase or spread down the arms or legs
- Start slowly and be consistent across days
- Don't do more on good days and less on bad days
- Slowly pace up the exercise program by first increasing exercise volume before intensity
- Consider an accredited Exercise Physiologist if you need help with exercise

References and further information

Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au
 Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au
 Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au
<http://www.chronicpinaustralia.org.au/>
<http://www.painaustralia.org.au/>

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