

Chronic or persistent pain is when pain occurs most days of the week, for at least a three month period.¹ About 1 in 5 Australians suffer from chronic pain and it most commonly occurs in people aged over 45.²

People experience pain differently and will have different responses to pain treatment. There are many ways to manage pain. You need to find the one that works best for you.

Managing pain involves strategies that help you reduce the impact of pain on your daily activities. It may include individually tailored exercises, performing activities that are within your pain tolerance or using pain relievers.

Non-medicine treatments

You may consider seeing a physiotherapist, chiropractor or other health professional who may be able to help reduce and/or manage the pain. Staying active may prevent or reduce the likelihood of further pain. You may find it useful to participate in support or self-help groups, where you can share experiences and learn about ways to manage pain from others in similar situations.

Medicine treatments

If you need a pain reliever, you may purchase it over the counter or get a prescription from your doctor. It is important to see your doctor, who can review your medicines, recommend options and help you decide what is best for you. This is particularly important if you suffer from any other medical conditions, such as stomach, kidney, liver or heart problems.

It's important to check the active ingredients in all your medicines, including complementary medicines (herbal/natural/vitamin/mineral), as they may contain the same or similar active ingredients. Over-the-counter medicines can change the effectiveness of other medicines you are taking.

Keep track of your medicines with a Medicines List, which you can order or print from the NPS website at www.nps.org.au. Show it to your doctor or pharmacist to make sure you're using your medicines safely and effectively.

Over-the-counter medicines

There are a range of pain relievers that can be bought without prescription over the counter. Their active ingredients (the chemicals that make the medicine work) include paracetamol and ibuprofen.

Paracetamol is one of the most commonly used over-the-counter pain relievers and is effective for mild to moderate pain. When you take paracetamol, check that none of your other medicines also contain paracetamol, as it can cause serious liver damage if taken in larger doses than recommended.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, should be used at the lowest dose that improves your symptoms and only be used for a short time. These medicines may not be suitable for people with stomach troubles, heart problems, kidney impairment, high blood pressure or asthma.

Other pain relievers

Combination pain relievers contain more than one active ingredient. Examples include: Nurofen Plus, a combination of ibuprofen and codeine; Aspalgin, a combination of aspirin and codeine; and Codalgin that is a combination of paracetamol and codeine. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before using these.

Opioids include medicines with active ingredients such as buprenorphine, codeine, fentanyl, oxycodone and tramadol. These medicines may be addictive and may have side effects such as nausea and vomiting. Due to their sedative effect, your driving abilities might be impaired. Never mix alcohol with opioids. For some people opioids are effective in controlling pain but others may not be able to tolerate them.

Talk to your doctor

To ensure the safest and most effective pain management from these medicines, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about:

- ▶ the location of the pain and how long you have had it
- ▶ whether a particular pain management approach is right for you
- ▶ possible side effects of the medicines
- ▶ other medicines you are taking, including complementary medicines, as they may interact with any other medicines your doctor recommends.

Talk to your doctor about a pain management plan.

Your checklist for pain management medicines

There are a number of important things to talk to your doctor or pharmacist about when working out the best pain medicine for your individual circumstances and preferences:

- ▶ Should I take this medicine at regular intervals or only when I feel pain?
- ▶ How long will it take to work?
- ▶ Is it safe to use in the long term?
- ▶ How will this medicine benefit me?
- ▶ Will this medicine make me feel drowsy?
- ▶ What side effects should I expect or watch out for?
- ▶ What can I do to minimise any side effects?
- ▶ How will this medicine interact with my other medicines?
- ▶ Could I become addicted to this medicine?
- ▶ What should I do if the pain doesn't go away?
- ▶ What alternative kinds of pain medicine or management could I consider?

For more information

Contact Medicines Line on **1300 633 424** or NPS at www.nps.org.au.

You can find more information about chronic pain on Arthritis Australia's website at www.arthritisaustralia.com.au or Chronic Pain Australia's website at www.chronicpinaustralia.org.

Reference

1. Britt H, Miller G, Knox S, et al. General practice activity in Australia 2004–05, 2005.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Australian General Practice Statistics and Classification Centre. SAND abstract 82 from the BEACH program 2005–06: prevalence and management of chronic pain. Sydney: AGPSCC University of Sydney, 2006.



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