



Understanding Pain

Pain is your body's way of telling you that something might be going on. It can feel different for everyone. Understanding pain and why you hurt can help you know what's normal and what's not normal. It can also help you know when to ask for help and how you can manage your pain so you can feel better.



Pain is Personal

Only the person feeling the pain knows how much it hurts. Two people can have the same injury. But one person may feel a little pain and the other person may feel a lot of pain. That's because pain depends on many things, like your body, your feelings, and your past experiences. This is why doctors ask you to describe your pain, because only you can explain how it feels to you.

Pain is more than just a feeling in your body. It's also about your thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The International Association for the Study of Pain says pain is an unpleasant feeling that can happen when your body is hurt or when it "feels like" it might be hurt, even if it doesn't look like you hurt yourself. Pain is an experience, not just a symptom. That means it can be affected by many things, like:

- What's going on in your body?
- What past traumas have you had?
- What are your current emotions?
- How much stress do you have in your life?
- What's going on in your daily life?



The people in your life, your culture and ethnicity, and how you think and feel about pain can also affect how much pain you feel.

Sometimes, your body can feel pain even when there's no obvious reason for the pain. This is because pain is your body's alarm system. It warns you when something might be wrong. When your body senses something is going on inside you, it sends a message to your brain. Then your brain decides whether you should feel pain and what to do about it. Pain isn't always about damage. It's your brain's way of protecting you. Think of it as your body's smoke alarm.



Types of Pain

There are two main types of pain: **acute pain** and **chronic pain**.



Acute pain

- Happens suddenly.
- Usually lasts less than 3 months.
- Often caused by an illness or injury, like a sprained ankle, a burn, or a cut. The pain you have after surgery is acute pain.
- Usually goes away once your body heals or you get the right treatment.



Chronic pain

- Usually lasts for 3 or more months.
- It may happen even after your body heals.
- Not just pain that sticks around from an old injury.
- Sometimes caused by long-term conditions like arthritis or nerve damage.
- Sometimes, there is no clear cause for the pain, like with fibromyalgia and some types of back pain.

When pain becomes chronic, it stops being a helpful warning sign and turns into a condition of its own. It can change the way your brain and nerves work, sending pain signals when nothing is actually wrong. This is like an alarm that won't shut off or a smoke detector that keeps alarming from just lighting a candle.

Experts call this increased sensitivity to pain **central sensitization**. This means the nervous system becomes overly sensitive, making the body feel more pain than it should. This can happen in any chronic pain condition, no matter what caused it in the first place. Think of your body like a house, and pain as your house's alarm system. When everything in the body works right, the alarm goes off only when there's real danger. But with chronic pain, the alarm becomes too sensitive, going off even when there's no real problem.





Treating Acute and Chronic Pain

Treating acute pain focuses on helping you feel better and allowing the cause of pain to heal. This usually involves things like taking non-prescription pain relievers, using heat or ice, resting or getting injections. These treatments are often helpful for short-term pain. On rare occasions, it may involve having surgery.

Chronic pain is different. There's no quick fix. Most treatments don't make the pain go away completely. And some treatments can have side effects. That's why it's important to learn how to adjust and take an active role in managing your pain. A team approach – called a multidisciplinary approach – works best. This may include pain specialists, physical therapists, counselors, and other healthcare professionals. Programs like pain rehabilitation and the right steps to help you manage pain on your own can help you feel more in control. There is hope. Pain can get better over time, and even if it doesn't go away, many people find ways to live well and enjoy life again.

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