

Health Care Treatments for Pain Management

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Treating chronic pain can be challenging. Treatments are not one-size-fits-all. Health care professionals can help people find treatments that help them manage their pain. Good communication with the medical team can help people advocate for what works for them.

Medicines

Chronic pain is often caused by hidden health issues. Doctors start by trying medicines that treat these issues. If that is impossible or not enough, doctors suggest other types of pain meds.

Non-opioid or non-narcotic pain medicines ease pain and swelling without the risk of addiction. These include:

- Acetaminophen
- NSAIDs (aspirin, naproxen, ibuprofen)

A *narcotic* medicine is defined as a drug that in proper doses:

- Dulls the senses
- Eases pain
- Causes deep sleep (but can reduce breathing frequency which can be unsafe if not managed appropriately)

In large or wrong doses, narcotics cause a trance-like state, coma, or seizures.

Opioids are narcotic pain medications. They change the way the brain handles pain messages. They can also cause euphoria, a state of great bliss. Together, these effects reduce how people feel pain.

Examples of opioids are:

- Codeine
- Morphine
- Hydrocodone
- Oxycodone
- Heroin

Opioid-like narcotic pain meds also reduce how people feel pain. Tramadol is a common example.

Narcotic pain medicines can cause major side effects. They have a bad effect on:

- Digestion (can cause constipation)
- Hormones

- Sexual function
- Memory and concentration
- Balance
- Breathing

The longer you use narcotics, the more side effects you may have. People who use them for a long time are especially at risk for addiction or misuse. Also, narcotic pain medicines can change the nervous system over time. This can cause more pain.

Doctors also prescribe *drugs* made for other health issues that seem to help with pain. Examples are:

- Antidepressants (tricyclics, SSRIs, SSNRIs)
- Anticonvulsants (gabapentin, topiramate)
- Muscle relaxants (carisoprodol, cyclobenzaprine)
- Anti-anxiety medicines (diazepam, alprazolam, lorazepam)
- Insomnia medicines (zolpidem, eszopiclone)

Diet

Some causes of pain call for *special diets*. For example, people with heartburn would benefit from eating a low-acid diet. Most causes of pain do not come with certain diets. Most health experts recommend a *healthy, balanced diet*. This means eating a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, carbohydrates, and proteins. This helps people keep a healthy weight. A dietician can help you make healthy choices you enjoy.

Exercise

Exercises for strength and flexibility are important for pain management. Most people can do gentle exercises. They can change exercises like yoga, tai chi, and stretching to meet their needs and limits. Walking and swimming are helpful low-impact activities. More intense exercises, like running, weight training, and sports may be appropriate. Talk about exercise choices with your doctor.

Physical and occupational therapy can help you work on special physical needs. Therapists will find your strengths and weaknesses and design an exercise program. The goal is to increase your ability to function. *Functional training* helps people return to their daily activities. This can mean getting up and down stairs or returning to a job.

Herbal remedies, vitamins, and supplements

In the U.S., all medicines are tested and approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Herbal remedies and vitamins are supplements. They do not need FDA approval. Some people find these substances help their pain. Some supplements people with pain use are:

- Vitamins B and D
- Digestive enzymes
- Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate

- Coenzyme Q10, or CoQ10
- Fish oil
- Antioxidants (alpha lipoic acid [ALA], turmeric, ginger)

Even safe supplements can be harmful. Echinacea is taken to build up the immune system. That is bad news for people with autoimmune diseases. Their immune system attacks their bodies. Evaluation of risks and benefits of these therapies must be done. Herbal remedies, vitamins, and supplements can be helpful, but always speak to your doctor before using them.

Other treatments

Acupuncture is a Chinese therapy designed to help with many health issues. A therapist puts thin needles in the skin. This usually does not hurt. Studies show that acupuncture can help with many problems, including acute pain. Doctors are not sure how it works, but it is generally safe.

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) is a small electrical device with electrodes that go on the skin. A small amount of electricity is sent to the electrodes. This keeps nerves busy so they send fewer pain messages. People with some chronic pain conditions say this helps.

Resources

American Chronic Pain Association

<https://theacpa.org>

(800) 533-3231

American Academy of Pain Management

www.aapainmanage.org

By Beth Landau

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