

# Physiotherapy and chronic pain

*Get the right relief*

## How should we understand pain?

Pain is something everyone experiences, every day. When we reflect on instances of pain, they tend to come quickly and pass quickly. Often, pain makes very good sense to us – we bump or injure ourselves in some way, pain alerts us to this, we protect the injured area and the pain goes away. We call this short-lasting pain, '**acute pain**'.

Pain can also become long-lasting and we call this '**chronic or persistent pain**'. Chronic pain is pain that lasts for three months or longer, on a mostly continuous basis. Sometimes chronic pain is due to ongoing injury or illness affecting the body's structures and tissues. For most people experiencing chronic pain however, there is no evidence of continuing injury. A simpler way to think about chronic pain, is where pain exists after healing has finished.

Chronic pain can be experienced in any part of the body.

## Causes or contributors of pain?

In the last few decades, we have come to understand pain through the biopsychosocial lens. This means that the experience of pain comes not only from what is happening in our body but also from our mind, as we interpret and react to the pain within a social context.

This helps to explain why chronic pain often exists when the body's tissues have healed.

This does not mean that pain is 'in your head'. If you experience pain, it is real! Rather, it suggests that all contributing factors, including mood and anxiety levels for example, need to be evaluated to assess why your pain continues.

Throughout our lives, our nervous system changes and adapts to help us learn from and deal with different experiences – this is called neuroplasticity. Sometimes, however, this normal process of adapting leads to a 'sensitised state', where small triggers to the body create a large pain response. Recent evidence<sup>1</sup> shows that this is what occurs in many cases of persistent or chronic pain. It reminds us that we need to look further than what 'damage' might exist to the body's structures and tissues to determine why you are experiencing pain.

The immune system is also an important controller of the pain system, meaning that health and lifestyle are strong influencers of pain<sup>2</sup>. Pain frequently reduces our quality of sleep, which can make life tough, and poor sleep can in turn increase our pain.



**20-30%**  
of all people

Chronic pain is experienced by **20-30% of people across all ages**<sup>3</sup>.



**\$150bn**  
per year

Chronic pain costs the Australian society about **\$150bn per year**; more than any other chronic condition<sup>4</sup>.



**low**  
back pain

Chronic low back pain is the leading cause of disability throughout the world<sup>5</sup>.



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## How can physiotherapy help?

Your physiotherapist will conduct a thorough assessment of the possible contributors to your pain experience. These may include the strength and flexibility of your body, your goals and personal situation, and the understanding and expectations you have regarding your pain.

Your physiotherapist will assess the impact that pain is having on your life and assist you with many of those challenges. Developing a better understanding of your pain forms the basis for developing and progressing an appropriate active regime.

Chronic pain often stops people from moving. A physiotherapist will work with you and empower you, to be the key driver of your own progress.

Physiotherapists are highly educated, highly trained and competent in assessment, diagnosis, education and informing you of the best treatment options. Every person with chronic pain is different in both their presentation and goals. Your physiotherapist will utilise the evidence base, their clinical expertise and specific presentation and concerns, to determine the best management plan for you.

## Treatment

Physiotherapy treatment encompasses all evidence-based treatment options which are non-pharmaceutical and non-surgical.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' for chronic pain. Your physiotherapist will clear up misinformation or confusing advice you may have received and work with you to develop an effective exercise and activity regime. Frequently with chronic pain patients, hands-on administrations are not as successful as they may be in acute pain. More commonly, an appropriate active regime can help you to reduce pain, improve flexibility and strength and regain your confidence to move.

Pain management may involve a team of healthcare providers, including GPs, physiotherapists, nurses and other allied health practitioners, such as clinical psychologists.

Physiotherapy management is always 'patient-centred', ensuring you are involved and respected in the decision-making process. Research shows that education and treatment which empowers you is a huge and effective part of chronic pain management.

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## What next?

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To find your physiotherapist.

### VISIT

[www.choose.physio/pain](https://www.choose.physio/pain)

for further information.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Eller-Smith et al, 2018. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fncel.2018.00035/full>

<sup>2</sup> Klyne et al, 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29460011/>

<sup>3,4,5</sup> Deloitte. Cost of Pain in Australia. <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/economics/articles/cost-pain-australia.html>