

MANAGING CHRONIC PAIN: THE BASICS



“Chronic pain” is pain that lasts longer than 3 months. It can be very frustrating because there might be no quick fix and doctors might not even be able to explain the cause of the pain. Thus, it is very important for people with chronic pain to find ways to live a healthy, satisfying life despite the pain. Below are some tips for making this happen.

1

ACCEPT THE PAIN: It might sound odd, but people do best when they accept that they have pain that might not go away. “Accepting the pain” means realizing your doctor can’t cure the pain. It means you begin to work on living life again, despite the pain. Try to focus on making healthy life changes instead of decreasing the pain.

2

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “ACUTE” AND “CHRONIC” PAIN:

Acute pain results from an injury (a sprain or cut or broken bone). For acute pain, the injured area must rest so it can heal. But for chronic pain, the original cause of the pain has either healed, or can’t be fixed, or isn’t even known. As a result, resting is not likely to help. In fact, it often makes the problem worse.

3

BEGIN TO EXERCISE: The decrease in activity that often occurs with chronic pain can make the pain worse. When you are less active, you lose muscle strength and flexibility. This means that an activity that caused pain before might cause even more pain after a period of rest. To avoid the cycle this can produce, ask your doctor or physical therapist for some simple stretching and strengthening exercises to try.

4

PACE YOUR ACTIVITIES: People with chronic pain often avoid chores or other activities on “bad pain days” and then try to make up for this by doing a lot on “good pain days”. Unfortunately, this usually produces a flare-up in pain after a good pain day, which results in more rest and inactivity. This back-and-forth worsens the pain problem. To avoid this, try to do the same amount of activity on good days as you do on bad ones. Do not do less activity on bad days and do not do more on good days.

5

PRACTICE RELAXATION: Have you noticed that your pain worsens when you are stressed or upset? Stress makes muscles tense, which can worsen pain. Ask your doctor about ways to relax your muscles when you feel tense, then practice these at the first signs of stress or increased pain.

6

DISTRACT YOURSELF WHEN YOU HAVE PAIN: We have all heard stories of athletes who get injured but continue to play. When focused on the game an athlete doesn’t notice pain as much. Try this yourself: When you feel pain, find something to distract yourself. The less you think about your pain, the less it will bother you.

7

TRY NOT TO WORRY ABOUT THE PAIN: Remember that for chronic pain, pain is not the same as injury. Worry increases muscle tension, which increases pain.