

Ups and Downs of Living With Pain

Managing chronic pain takes a good doctor and positive lifestyle changes



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Dawn Klingensmith, CTW Features

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Usually, it's good news to patients when the doctor finds nothing wrong with them. But for chronic pain sufferers, not knowing the cause only adds to their sense of helplessness.

Chronic pain not only causes physical discomfort but also interferes with concentration, daily tasks, work, sleep, relationships and self-esteem.

Therefore, it's important to find a doctor who takes chronic pain seriously and knows how to treat it, says Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, a Kailua Kona, Hawaii-based internist and pain management specialist.

The American Academy of Pain Management website, www.aapainmanage.org, has a "pain professional" database searchable by location and other criteria.

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With a knowledgeable and trusted doctor on board, the patient must effectively communicate the nature and severity of the pain. Keeping a pain journal with daily activities and corresponding pain scores between 1 and 10 can help identify situations and stressors that trigger or worsen pain, says Chicago-based therapist Serena Wadhwa, who counsels chronic pain sufferers.

"A lot of patients notice that weather fluctuations trigger pain," she says. And while patients cannot control the weather, they can watch forecasts and plan accordingly.

Repetitive motions used on the job or throughout the course of the day may be to blame for chronic pain.

For the doctor's benefit as well as their own, patients can come up with an image or metaphor to describe their pain, such as hot coals beneath their skin. The same image can be used in visualization exercises to alleviate the pain, Wadhwa says. Example: mentally dousing "hot" pain with water.

The American Chronic Pain Association offers printable pain logs, daily activity checklists and other forms on the Pain Management Tools section of its website, www.theacpa.org.

However, some practitioners advise against keeping a journal because "the more you focus on pain, the more it's amplified," says Teitelbaum, author of "Pain Free 1-2-3: A Proven Program for Eliminating Chronic Pain Now" (McGraw-Hill, 2005).

Exercise can lessen pain in the short term by releasing feel-good brain chemicals called endorphins and in the long term by keeping muscles strong and joints flexible. In addition to gentle stretches, Teitelbaum recommends walking in the sunshine because chronic pain can be caused or exacerbated by a Vitamin D deficiency. Generated when sunlight hits the skin, Vitamin D inhibits painful inflammation, he explains.

Walkers should be careful to avoid sunburn, which puts them at risk for skin cancer.

Whether going for a stroll or tackling a to-do list, chronic pain sufferers should pace themselves even on good days. "A lot of times, when people feel free of pain, they try to do too much — shopping, going out with friends, cleaning the house — and then end up in bed for three days because they've overdone it," Wadhwa says.

Deep breathing, meditation, listening to music, and other stress-management techniques that relax the body have been shown to reduce pain.

Support groups and cognitive behavioral therapy (a type of talk therapy aimed at changing negative thought patterns and behaviors) can also help patients cope with chronic pain.

A hormone called human chorionic gonadotrophin, or HCG, has shown promise as an adjunct to opioid pain medications, says Teitelbaum, adding that the hormone is typically sold as drops.

Undiagnosed pain is often muscle or nerve pain. Soaking in a warm bath with two cups of Epson salt may provide temporary relief from muscle pain. So can heating pads. Physical therapy, chiropractic adjustment, and bodywork including massage and acupuncture may provide longer-lasting pain relief, Teitelbaum says.

Nerve pain is characterized by a shooting pain that patients sometimes liken to an electrical charge. Teitelbaum recommends the antioxidant alpha-lipoic acid and the amino acid Acetyl-L-carnitine, both available as dietary supplements, for nerve pain.

For inflammatory or joint pain, he recommends the anti-inflammatory supplement Curamin; cutting back on saturated fat, sugar and white flour; and eating more Omega-3 fatty acids from fish oil.

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