



## Persistent pain

- 1 in 5 Australians live with persistent pain
- It can affect us physically, mentally, emotionally and socially
- There are many things you can do to effectively manage persistent pain
- A team approach, with you at the centre, is the best way to manage your pain

Pain is your built-in alarm system. It makes you aware that something might be going wrong in your body.

Pain is essential for your survival as it makes you do something to protect your body. For example, when you touch the hot surface of a stove, your body feels pain and instinctively pulls away. The pain and your body's reaction prevents you from hurting yourself any further.

Throughout most of your body you have danger detectors (nociceptors). Pain is usually triggered when your brain receives messages from these nociceptors that they detect something potentially harmful.

Your brain evaluates these messages and decides whether your body needs protecting by producing pain. This is a normal reaction that protects you from any further harm.

### Acute and persistent pain

Pain may be described as acute or persistent.

Acute pain usually begins quickly and lasts for a short period of time. It's the pain associated with things like a stubbed toe, a broken bone, a burn or having a tooth removed.

Acute pain usually goes away after the underlying problem (e.g. inflammation, injury, infection) has been treated or has healed.

Persistent pain, sometimes called chronic pain, is pain that lasts for more than three months.

### What causes persistent pain

Persistent pain is very complex and may be caused by a number of factors. It may occur alongside conditions such as arthritis, diabetes or fibromyalgia. It may occur after an injury or trauma to the body has healed. And in some cases the cause isn't known.

Persistent pain is associated with changes to your nervous system (the nerves, spinal cord and brain). Throughout your life your nervous system changes and adapts to help you learn from and deal with different experiences. This is called neuroplasticity.

However sometimes this normal process of adapting and changing becomes abnormal. It's no longer helpful. Persistent pain is an example of this.

This change affects the way your brain understands the information it receives about pain and things such as touch or movement. Everyday activities that shouldn't cause pain, may cause pain. The affected area may be extremely tender to light pressure or even very light touch. Sometimes this pain can spread to nearby areas or to the opposite side of your body. This is often referred to as central sensitisation.

### The impact of pain

Although everyone's experience of living with persistent pain is different, there are many common factors. Pain impacts on us physically, emotionally, psychologically and socially.



It can affect:

- your strength and fitness
- your ability to complete your usual activities at home or work
- your mental health
- social connections
- intimacy
- sleep
- concentration
- your relationships with family, friends and work mates.

Fear of pain and further injury can affect the way you normally do things. Concerns about making things worse can affect the way you move and can make you less active. If this continues you can become deconditioned or out of shape. It can also increase the chance that pain will continue to persist.

### Diagnosis

Your doctor will discuss your pain with you and will:

- ask about your history of pain including:
  - if you've noticed any patterns, e.g. it's worse after resting
  - the type of pain, e.g. burning, aching
  - potential triggers
  - things that make your pain worse
  - things that make it better
- discuss any other health problems that you may have
- conduct a physical exam.

Sometimes your doctor may order a scan or some other test to confirm or rule out a condition. It's important to note that for some conditions, such as low back pain, scans aren't recommended at all.

Scans have a high rate of false positive findings. That means that the scan will indicate that something's wrong or abnormal in large numbers of people who have no pain at all.

A false positive may lead to a so-called 'abnormality' on a scan being named as the cause of your pain, but it may not be the cause at all.

A thorough examination by your doctor will decide whether scans or further tests are appropriate or helpful in developing a treatment plan that's right for you.

For more information about questions to ask your doctor before you get any test, treatment or procedure visit the Choosing Wisely Australia website.

### Treatment

A team approach, with you at the centre, is the best way to manage your pain and help you continue to do the things that are important to you. Your healthcare team (e.g. doctor, physiotherapist, pharmacist), family, friends and support groups all play a role in this team. But at the heart of the team is you.

There are many options for managing persistent pain—from exercise, to medication, to relaxation techniques.

Visit our website - [www.msk.org.au](http://www.msk.org.au) – and read our A-Z guide to managing pain for more detailed information.

### The future

Many factors influence your recovery and it's difficult to know how quickly you'll respond to treatment or how your condition will progress over time.

Most acute painful conditions resolve gradually over a few days to a few weeks. A smaller proportion can continue beyond three months and sometimes for much longer.

Despite the ongoing presence of pain, you can improve what you can do and how you feel.

When starting any new treatment, discuss with your doctor or health professional about setting small achievable goals. It's a good idea to include specific steps towards those goals to help you stay on track. If you're not progressing in the time you've discussed, it may be of benefit to reassess your plan to determine if a different approach can help you achieve your goals.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Psychologist
- Occupational therapist
- Musculoskeletal Australia  
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

## How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses.  
Phone 1800 263 265 or email [helpline@msk.org.au](mailto:helpline@msk.org.au).

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

## More to explore

- Better Health Channel  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- Beyondblue [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)  
Support Service - 1300 224 636
- Choosing Wisely Australia  
[www.choosingwisely.org.au](http://www.choosingwisely.org.au)
- Lifeline Crisis Support - 13 11 14
- National Prescribing Service [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)  
Medicine Line 1300 633 424
- Pain Australia [www.painaustralia.org.au](http://www.painaustralia.org.au)
- painHEALTH <http://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au>
- TAC [www.tac.vic.gov.au](http://www.tac.vic.gov.au)
- WorkSafe [www.worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au)

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