

Emergency Services

Chronic Pain

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than it normally takes for damaged tissues to heal. Generally, pain is chronic when it continues for more than 3 months after an injury, surgery, or illness. It can also result from another health condition like arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, or HIV.

In the past, chronic pain was thought to be a sign of something else but we now know that chronic pain can be a health condition by itself.

Chronic pain can be the result of a super sensitive nervous system that makes you feel pain when no actual damage to your body exists. Your nervous system becomes like a car alarm that keeps going off, even though no one is touching the car.

There is no single cause or treatment for this type of pain, and over-the-counter pain-relief medicines, such as Tylenol®, don't always work. To properly treat it, you and your doctor* need to look at your physical health, as well as look at what's going on emotionally and socially. Chronic pain can be triggered or made worse by stress, anxiety, grief and other forms of emotional upset.

The best way to treat chronic pain is through a team approach that involves your doctor. It might also include a physiotherapist, psychologist or counsellor, and other health care providers. Medications alone don't usually fix the problem.

***Note:** When we use 'doctor', we mean either doctor or nurse practitioner.

Self-Management

Key to improving your function and well-being is to learn how to care for yourself (self-manage). Self-management means all the things you do to live better with your chronic pain. This might include movement or exercise, relaxation, managing your stress, pacing yourself, and getting enough sleep.

Self-management works best when you partner with your healthcare providers on a treatment and wellness plan that addresses all aspects of your pain, not just medications.

Self-Management Resources

There are many resources that can support you to live better with chronic pain.

- www.liveplanbe.ca is a free self-management website you can use to learn about chronic pain, connect with others in pain, track your symptoms and function, and set wellness goals.
- **The Pain BC Toolbox** is a downloadable PDF booklet filled with resources for people living with pain. Download it here: <http://www.painbc.ca/chronic-pain/pain-toolbox>
- www.mycarepath.ca is a free tool for kids and teens with chronic pain developed by BC Children's Hospital and Pain BC.
- **Self-Management BC** teaches free 6-week classes in communities on how to self-manage with chronic pain. <http://www.selfmanagementbc.ca/>

Check with your health care provider for other resources available in your area for people with pain, such as Pain Clinics, free or low-cost movement groups, mindfulness classes, peer support or coaching, and other resources.

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Chronic Pain (continued)

Flare-ups

A 'flare-up' is the worsening of your pain, without new symptoms.

Flare-ups can be managed better when:

- ✓ You have a flare-up plan.
- ✓ You are using self-management techniques.
- ✓ You have a doctor that knows you and your history.

It is hard to see a doctor you don't know, especially when you are feeling poorly or are in pain. Since pain is always a complex problem, it is equally hard for a doctor to help you when they don't know you or have your history.

How to make a flare-up plan:

A 'flare-up' plan is a set of instructions to follow when your usual pain worsens. Make your flare-up plan with your doctor during regular office visits. Write it down so you can refer to it when needed.

Your plan can include:

- Reminders of self-management techniques that work for you in times of flare-ups such as relaxation techniques, distraction with a funny video or music, mindfulness, stretching, yoga, or exercise.
- A reminder to contact your doctor or pain specialist for an emergency office visit or phone call.
- Medications to take, along with when and how to take them. For example, what medication to take for 'breakthrough pain' (sudden spikes of pain not relieved with usual pain relievers).

Words and meaning

Flare-up: Worsening of your usual pain, without new or different symptoms

Flare-up plan: A plan you make with your doctor that says how you will deal with a flare-up

When you have a flare-up

Before you go to the Emergency Department:

- Use your flare-up plan, if you have one.
- Try to calm your nervous system by using self-management techniques (see Self-Management Resources).
- Try to contact your doctor (or pain specialist). Many doctors keep 'day of' and 'emergency' slots in their daily office schedule for these situations.
- If you need a medication refill and you can't get in to see your doctor, call your pharmacy. Depending on how your doctor wrote your prescription, the pharmacist might be able to do an emergency refill for a few days until you can see your doctor or specialist.

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

- You have new pain or other symptoms that concern you.
- You have the symptoms your doctor has told you need an Emergency Department visit.
- You have not been able to solve the problem by using your flare-up plan or by calling your doctor or pharmacist and the problem cannot wait until you can see your doctor.

Any time you go to the Emergency Department, bring your medication bottles, your flare-up plan, and the names of your doctors.

For any health questions or concerns

- **HealthLink BC:** visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 TTY) anytime. Open 24 hours. Available in 130 languages. For an interpreter, say your language in English. Wait until an interpreter comes on the phone.

Self-management: The skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to deal with the ups and downs of your pain and with everyday activities

Persistent or complex pain: Other names for chronic pain.