

CHRONIC PAIN AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



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We would like to acknowledge that the Pain BC office is located on the ancestral, traditional and unceded territory on the x^wməθkwəy'əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

We are grateful to the ancestors who have cared for this land. Pain BC is committed to being a guest here in a good way and to doing our part in dismantling systems of oppression as a path towards reconciliation.

Pain BC would also like to give thanks to Elder, Susan Elliott, and, Social Worker, Deni Wallace who generously shared their wisdom in the creation of this resource.

The links in this resource were active at time of publication. If you find a link that is no longer working, search for the title of the publication or organization you wish to view in your search engine. To notify us of any broken links, email us at supportservices@painbc.ca

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Photo by Taylor Shuttleworth
 Location: Traditional territory of Liḡ'w'ildax'w peoples

INTRODUCTION

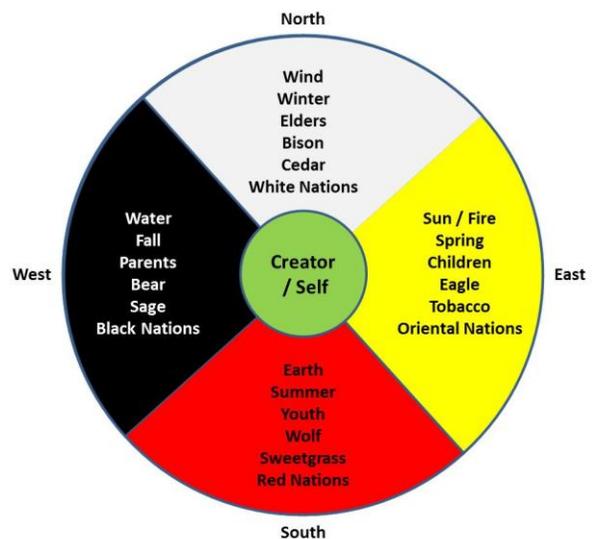
Indigenous peoples in Canada experience higher rates of disability. According to a survey conducted by Statistics Canada, pain-related disabilities were the most prevalent (Hahmann and Badets, 2019). Historical and ongoing trauma and colonization, racism, discrimination, and social inequities, such as lack of access to quality care, can all make it difficult for Indigenous peoples to access supports for pain. The Canadian Pain Task Force acknowledges the realities that Indigenous peoples in Canada are facing when accessing care for their pain and have made a commitment to joint action on this issue ([read more](#)) (Health Canada, 2021). You are not alone in your pain, and there is support available. The following information, support, tools and resources may help you.

THE BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH AND THE MEDICINE WHEEL

The bio-psycho-social-spiritual model approach to chronic pain care emphasizes that one’s health is influenced by biological, psychological, social, spiritual, and cultural factors. These factors influence both our experience and ability to recover, or live well, with pain. Therefore, treatment for pain should involve consideration of each aspect.

The bio-psycho-social-spiritual model approach to health care parallels Indigenous ways of knowing which conceptualize the world through a wholistic lens which considers all components of self.

For instance, the **Medicine Wheel** guides the symbolic balance and interconnection between physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental health. When considering the notion that health is a balance of the dimensions of the Medicine Wheel. **All aspects of self and feelings of unbalance can exasperate the experiences of chronic pain.**



It’s important to note, that among Indigenous peoples, the concept of the medicine wheel varies. However, the above description provides an overview of some of the gifts and lessons connected with the Medicine Wheel. To learn more about the interpretation of the Medicine Wheel in your community, it may be helpful to connect with an Elder or Spiritual Leader.

INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO WELLNESS

Diverse Indigenous cultures and spiritual practices offer wellness approaches to address the various aspects of oneself to promote balanced health. **Cultural and traditional healing practices may be part of your wellness journey with chronic pain.** The following examples are ways you can consider incorporating traditional and cultural healing practices into your wellness plan:

- Engaging in land-based healing practices that acknowledge identity, healing, and knowledge within Indigenous traditional territories.
- The use and respect of traditional medicines (i.e., cedar, tobacco, sage, sweetgrass).
- Engaging with traditional cultural practices (i.e., ceremony, sweat lodges, smudging, learning language, storytelling, etc.).
- Renewal of spirituality.
- Incorporating more traditional foods into your diet (a focus on whole foods) (i.e., gardening, trapping, hunting, fishing, gathering).
- Practicing intergenerational knowledge sharing within community (learning from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Traditional Healers, family, and youth).



Medicine bag made in Tsay Keh Dene on the traditional territory of the Sekani.

TWO-EYED SEEING APPROACH

Marshall, a respected Mi'kmaq Elder, developed the concept of two-eyed seeing which recognizes the value of both Indigenous ways of knowing and western ways of knowing, emphasizing the integration of the two can foster holistic understanding of complex issues. Applying the teachings of Elder, Marshall to the management of chronic pain, both traditional and western medicine can be supportive. For

"Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing and to using both of these eyes together."

(Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012, p. 335)

instance, you may lean on one approach more than another at different times during your chronic pain journey. Each person's treatment path is unique to them. For support with merging both traditional and western medicine approaches into your care, you may consider connecting with an Elder, Traditional Healer, Knowledge Keeper, or Indigenous health care provider for guidance.

TRADITIONAL HEALING RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

Traditional wellness and healing are often overlooked by the health care system. The following resources, services and support may be helpful with integrating cultural and traditional health care approaches into your wellness plan:

- Connecting with an Elder in residence, Traditional Healer, Spiritual Leader, or Knowledge Keeper.
- Connect with an Indigenous Health Care Provider (Indigenous Patient Navigator, Indigenous Liaison, Indigenous Nurse Liaison etc.) to help you navigate the health care system and connect with cultural resources and supports. See list of Indigenous Health Care Providers by health authority:
 - Vancouver Coastal Health: vch.ca/en/service/indigenous-patient-navigators-ipns
 - Fraser Health: fraserhealth.ca/health-topics-a-to-z/indigenous-health/indigenous-health-liaisons
 - Island Health: islandhealth.ca/our-services/indigenous-health-services/indigenous-liaison-nurses
 - Interior Health: interiorhealth.ca/services/indigenous-patient-navigator
 - Northern Health: indigenoushealthnh.ca
 - Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA): phsa.ca/our-services/programs-services/indigenous-health
 - Providence Health: providencehealthcare.org/en/indigenous-wellness-services/indigenous-wellness-supports
- Connecting with your local Friendship Centre: Not-for-profit, Indigenous-led, social service organizations that work to promote, develop, and deliver accessible programs and services that support Indigenous peoples living in urban areas and away from home: bcaafc.com

- First Nations Primary Care: Provides access to culturally safe and trauma-informed primary care services for people who are Indigenous, Inuit or Métis and their families. Use HealthLink BC's [search engine](#) to find a Centre near you or contact them directly for support at 8-1-1.
- BC Metis Federation: bcmetis.com
- Metis Nation BC: Provides information on culturally relevant health, social and economic programs and services for Métis chartered communities and Métis people: mnb.ca
- Indigenous languages - Learning and teaching resources: noslangues-ourlanguages.gc.ca/en/ressources-resources/autochtones-aboriginaux/apprentissage-learning-eng
- First Voices: A collaborative platform where Indigenous communities manage, curate and share their languages: firstvoices.com



*"Nlaka'pamux nation, Skuppah band. Indigenous Elder.
Bill S 3 First Nations status. Gender Equality Act."*

SUPPORT FOR CHRONIC PAIN

If you would like support managing your chronic pain, you may consider accessing the following resources:

- Pain Support Line: Call or text 1-833-261-7246: painbc.ca/supportline

- Chronic Pain Tool Kit, Grand Council Treaty #3 - Rooted in Traditional Anishinaabe and Western medicine: gct3.ca/social/health/chronic-pain
- Making Sense of Pain: Online: painbc.ca/find-help/support-programs/making-sense-of-pain
- Pain BC would like to partner with Indigenous communities to run Making Sense of Pain where there is an established need. If you are interested in offering this program in your community, please visit the link for more details on becoming a site: painbc.ca/making-sense-of-pain
- Self-Management BC: selfmanagementbc.ca. For Indigenous-specific programming, contact 604-940-6950 or email clearsky@uvic.ca
- Coaching for Health: painbc.ca/coaching
- Pain Support & Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- Empowered Relief®: paincanada.ca/resources/empowered-relief
- Managing Pain Before and After Surgery: paincanada.ca/course/managing
- Pain BC, Find Help Directory: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/directory
- Pain BC, Information Sheets: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/downloadables
- Live Plan Be+: liveplanbeplus.ca
- Power Over Pain Portal: portal.poweroverpain.ca



The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.

Image from Chronic Pain Tool Kit by Grand Council Treaty #3

Before moving to the next section, Pain BC would like to acknowledge that due to the ongoing impacts of colonialism, there are divisions on which services are available to Indigenous peoples based on those who are registered, versus not registered. This information sheet may reference resources which are not available to all Indigenous identifying individuals. However, Pain BC has made an effort to also include culturally tailored resources that are accessible to all Indigenous peoples.

MENTAL HEALTH AND CHRONIC PAIN

As mentioned before, biological, psychological, social, spiritual, and cultural factors all influence pain. Therefore, treatment for pain should involve consideration of each aspect, including the psychological. By caring for your mental health, you can positively impact your pain levels.

According to a consensus completed by Statistics Canada (2025), Indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples have significantly higher rates of suicide and experience more adverse impacts on their mental health. Factors such as poverty, lack of accessible healthcare, historical trauma, and discrimination all contribute to these issues. If you are struggling with your mental health, you are not alone, there is help available:

- Pain BC, Mental Health and Pain: painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-10/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Pain%20-%20Final.pdf
- Pain BC, Finding a Mental Health Counselor for Pain: painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-10/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Finding%20a%20Mental%20Health%20Counsellor%20-%20Final.pdf
- First Nations Health Benefits offers mental health plan through the Mental Wellness and Counselling Program: Call 1-855-550-5454 or visit fnha.ca/benefits/mental-health for more information.
- Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Counselling Program: If you are a Survivor, family member, or Indigenous person impacted by the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQI+ people, trauma-informed supports are available to you. Call 1-855-550-5454 or visit fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-MMIWG-Counselling-Program-FAQs.pdf for more information.
- Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program: Eight providers across the province provide emotional and cultural support, either virtually or in person. Call 604-220-3958

or visit fnha.ca/what-we-do/mental-wellness-and-substance-use/residential-schools for more information.

- Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS): Call 1-800-721-0066 or visit irsss.ca for more information.
- Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society: provides confidential outreach services such as counselling, cultural supports and personal wellness programs. Call 1-888-403-3123 or visit tsowtunlelum.org for more information.
- First Nations Health Authority, Mental Health Supports: fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-mental-health-and-wellness-supports-for-indigenous-people.pdf
- VictimLinkBC: provides information and referral services to all victims of crime and immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence, including victims of human trafficking exploited for labour or sexual services: gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/victimlinkbc
- First Nations Virtual Substance Use and Psychiatry Service: referral-based service connects individuals and their health and wellness providers with specialist support for assessment, harm reduction, relapse prevention and treatment care planning: fnha.ca/VirtualHealth.
- Mind Space, Weaving Wellbeing Together (WWT): Peoples. Co-facilitated by Indigenous physicians, WWT follows the content of the Level 1 CBT Skills program, adapted to include culture and more relevant examples: mind-space.ca
- Metis Nation British Columbia, Metis Counselling Connections (MCC) Program: provides financial assistance to MNBC Citizens to access counselling and clinical services: mnbca.ca/work-programs/programs-services/metis-counselling-connection-mcc-program
- Alcohol & Drug Information & Referral Service (ADIRS): 1-800-663-1441
- National Overdose Response Services (NORS): 1-888-688-NORS (1-800-688-6677)
- Alcoholics Anonymous: aa.org/find-aa
- Narcotics Anonymous: na.org/meetingsearch
- SMART Recovery: leading, evidence-informed approach to overcoming addictive behavior and leading a balanced life: smartrecovery.org

While the above resources can help people work through emotional issues that lead to thoughts of suicide, you need help more urgently if you are in crisis.

For immediate mental health support, you may consider contacting the following:

- [KUU-US Crisis Response Service](#) (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-800-588-8717
- [Hope For Wellness](#) (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-855-242-3310
- Métis Crisis Line: 1-833-638-4722
- Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Crisis Line: 1-844-413-6649
- National Indian Residential School Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 9-8-8 or 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
- BC Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (no area code)



Desmond Williams - Nlaka'pamux

ADDRESSING RACISM IN HEALTH CARE

According to Statistics Canada (2024), roughly one in five Indigenous peoples report experiencing unfair treatment, racism or discrimination from a health care professional. If you experience racism, discrimination, or other care related concerns within the health care system and would like to provide feedback or make a report, the following channels and supports are available to you:

- Connect with an Indigenous Health Care Provider for support with complaints process.

- [First Nations Health Authority, Quality Care and Safety Office](#): Email quality@fnha.ca or call 1-844-935-1044. This office offers support for First Nations clients and families both inside and outside of Island Health. The office can: help navigate the complaints process, provide guidance rooted in Cultural Safety and Humility, and ensure your privacy is respected.
- Métis Nation British Columbia – Métis Health Experience Program: This program provides a safe, Métis-led space to share health experiences, seek support, and advocate for change. It is open to all Métis individuals, families, and communities across BC: mnbc.ca/mhe. Contact any one of our
- Métis Health Experiences Advocates at healthexperience@mnbc.ca.
- Contact your local Patient Care Quality Office:
- [Vancouver Coastal Health](#): 1-877-993-9199 or email pcqo@vch.ca
- [Provincial Health Services Authority](#): 1-866-952-2448
- [Island Health](#): 250-370-8323, 1-877-977-5797, or email patientcarequalityoffice@islandhealth.ca
- [Interior Health](#): 1-877-442-2001 ext. 1 or email pcqo@interiorhealth.ca
- [Northern Health](#): 1-877-677-7715 or email patientcarequalityoffice@northernhealth.ca
- [Providence Health](#): 604-806-8284 or email phcpcqo@providencehealth.bc.ca



Photo by Taylor Shuttleworth
Location: Traditional territory
of Liḡwíłdaxw peoples.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day: This is a unique service open to all First Nations people and their families living in BC. The program includes doctors of Indigenous ancestry. Call 1-855-344-3800 to book an appointment: fnha.ca/what-we-do/ehealth/virtual-doctor-of-the-day
- First Nations Health Authority, First Nations Health Benefits and Services: 1-855-550-5454
- First Nations Health Authority, Benefits Guide: fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-Health-Benefits-Guide.pdf
- First Nations Health Authority Program Guide: fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA_Programs_Compndium.pdf#page=14
- First Nations Health Authority, Health Benefit Appeals: fnha.ca/benefits/appeals

- First Nations Health Authority, Nursing Services: fnha.ca/what-we-do/nursing-services
- First Nations Health Authority, Pharmacy Benefit: fnha.ca/benefits/pharmacy
- First Nations Health Authority, Medical Travel Benefit: fnha.ca/benefits/medical-transportation
- First Nations Health Authority, Status Registration: fnha.ca/benefits/eligibility/status-registration
- First Nations Health Authority, 2S/LGBTQQIA+ Wellness: fnha.ca/wellness/2slgbtqqia-wellness
- Government of Canada, Non-insured health benefits for First Nations and Inuit: sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1572537161086/1572537234517
- Apply for, renew, or replace a Secure Certificate of Indian Status (secure status card) or Certificate of Indian Status (status card): sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100032380/1572461388012
- Pathways Directory: An online search engine for medical doctors, clinics, and community services/ programs (including Indigenous-specific services): pathwaysbc.ca/login
- BC 211: A free, confidential service that connects people to helpful and vital resources in their community, including Indigenous-specific resources - Call or text 2-1-1
- Indigenous Services Canada: canada.ca/en/indigenous-services-canada.html
- BC Housing, Indigenous: bchousing.org/indigenous
- British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS): bcands.bc.ca
- Native Courtworker and Counselling Association: An organization that helps Indigenous people navigate the criminal justice system: nccabc.ca
- HopeAir: A well-known national charity that arranges free flights for patients of all ages who cannot afford to fly to receive the medical care they require. - Call 1-877-346-HOPE (4673) or visit hopeair.ca for more information.
- Travel Assistance Program (TAP BC): A program that helps alleviate some of the transportation costs for eligible BC residents who must travel within the province for non-emergency medical specialist services not available in their own community. - Call 1-800-663-7100 or visit gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/accessing-health-care/tap-bc/travel-assistance-program-tap-bc

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