

How to Live Better With Chronic Pain



More than 50 million Americans have chronic pain. The good news is that there are many things you can do to manage your chronic pain.

What is chronic pain?

There are two kinds of pain. Acute pain occurs after an injury or during an illness, gets better over time, and is treated differently than chronic pain. Chronic pain is different. It lasts 6 months but often lasts longer, even years.

Chronic pain:

- may or may not have a specific cause
- lasts over time but may vary from day to day
- does not go away even with treatment
- may disrupt your sleep, making you tired and irritable

- may cause depression and anxiety
- may make your muscles tense, causing more pain
- can cause you to stop or cut back your regular daily activities
- disrupts your home life, work, hobbies, and your relationships with friends, and family

Managing chronic pain

The good news is that there are many things you can do to help manage your chronic pain. Using several methods together is often the most helpful approach. (See chart on reverse.)

Studies has shown that strategies such as exercise, relaxation, and changing negative thought patterns can help people cope better with chronic pain. These strategies may be used in addition to physical therapy, medications, supplements, and other treatments. Switching from one doctor to another in hopes of finding a cure can be frustrating for both you and your physicians. Being flexible and taking an active role in your care can help give you more control of your life.

Thinking about alternative treatments?

Some studies show that the following treatments may help manage chronic pain:

Acupressure uses gentle and effective pressure on appropriate points on the body. It can help relieve pain, tension, and discomfort.

Acupuncture involves inserting fine needles into the body at specific points to stimulate healing. It may provide

short-term relief of chronic low back and neck pain, and can also treat migraine and tension headaches.

Biofeedback is a method that teaches you how to control body functions that you normally do not think about, such as skin temperature, heart rate, or blood pressure. It requires home practice between office visits.

Herbs and Supplements are sold over-the-counter and vary widely in quality and purity. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist before you take any supplements to be sure there is no risk for you, including interactions with your medications. Kaiser Permanente pharmacies carry only herbs that have been shown to be effective in treating specific medical conditions.

When to call Kaiser Permanente

- ✓ You have a chronic pain condition that has never been evaluated by your doctor.
- ✓ You have new pain or your pain gets worse or out of control.
- ✓ You cannot sleep because of pain.
- ✓ You have trouble taking your pain medicine.
- ✓ You have concerns about your pain medicine.
- ✓ Your activity level begins to decrease.
- ✓ You are worried or anxious about your pain.
- ✓ You feel down or blue or you don't enjoy things like you once did.

Helpful tips to manage chronic pain:

Pace yourself.	If your activities leave you in pain the next day, try: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breaking large jobs into smaller ones • Alternating hard and easy activities • Doing relaxation exercises
Relax.	Exercises such as slow deep breathing, meditation, and guided imagery can help manage pain. Learn more by visiting kp.org/mydoctor . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Click on Podcasts under Healthy Living Resources on the left-hand side of the screen. • Choose Health Journeys Guided Imagery Programs: Ease Pain and Relieve Stress.
Exercise.	Gentle daily exercise may actually decrease chronic pain. Stronger muscles help you become more mobile and independent. It also may be a pleasant distraction. Learn exercises to strengthen your back by visiting kp.org/mydoctor . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Click on Videos on the left-hand side of the screen. • Choose videos on Spine Care Exercises.
Think positive thoughts.	How you think can affect your mood, activities, and your pain. By noticing your thought patterns, you can work on thinking more positively.
Do pleasant activities.	Watching a movie, reading a book, listening to music, or spending time with a friend can be powerful distractions from pain.
Follow your medication plan.	Work with your doctor/nurse practitioner or chronic pain team to develop a medication plan. Do not increase or decrease your medication without talking to your doctor/nurse practitioner.
Stop smoking and cut back on caffeine from all sources, avoid diet supplements, decongestants, and herbs that contain ephedrine.	These stimulants can cause already sore and painful parts of your body to tense and may increase pain. They also can disturb your sleep. Cutting down on them may help you feel better.
Prepare for flare-ups.	Pain flare-ups are common. Create and use an action plan to manage them when they occur.

Recommended reading

Managing Pain Before It Manages You, Margaret Caudill, MD, PhD

Mayo Clinic On Chronic Pain, David W. Swanson, MD, editor.

Additional resources

- Less pain, more life. Is chronic pain interfering with your sleep, mood, physical activity, work, and relationships with family and friends? Regain control with our online HealthMedia® Care™ for Pain program. Visit kp.org/pain and get started today.
- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.