



DEALING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

A RESOURCE FOR VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

Many Veterans live with chronic pain. Pain is called “chronic” when it lasts over a long period of time. This includes pain that you feel regularly, even if it comes and goes. Chronic pain can affect a particular part of the body, such as the back, shoulders, or knee, or be experienced as general all-over body pain. Living with pain can interfere with your life because of the negative impact it has on how you are feeling and functioning day to day. However, by managing pain effectively (often referred to as pain management) you can feel better and live better. Effective pain management includes a number of things:

WORK WITH AN UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGEABLE DOCTOR TO EVALUATE TREATMENT OPTIONS

While primary care providers (PCPs) can often help you deal effectively with painful symptoms, depending on the severity and duration of those symptoms it may be important to talk to your PCP about a referral to a doctor who specializes in pain medicine. Most Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers have a pain management clinic, where Veterans can be referred. Developing an open and trusting relationship with this doctor is important in treating your pain. Communicate with your doctor about where the pain is, how bad it is, and how often it occurs. Also talk about what makes the pain better or worse.

Since pain symptoms vary from person to person, pain management treatment strategies and treatments also need to be individualized. Medication alone is often not sufficient to treat pain and sometimes too many medications or taking them for prolonged periods of time can cause other problems. Additional treatments for you might include interventions for your specific type of pain or non-traditional treatments. As time passes, it is important for you and your doctor to reevaluate what’s working for you and what can be done differently to accommodate any changes in your symptoms. Finding the right combination is the key.

TAKE CARE OF THE THINGS YOU CAN CONTROL

Getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercising is essential to maintaining function and health and even more so when you are dealing with chronic pain. The good news is these are things you can control and do for yourself (View our fact sheet on Self-Management

and on how thinking patterns can impact your behavior.) It may seem that trying to exercise does not make sense- you have pain so you do not want to move, or are afraid to cause more pain. Studies show that low-impact graded aerobic exercise (such as walking, swimming, or biking) can actually help reduce the pain. (See the WRIISC fact sheet on graded aerobic exercise to manage pain, Exercise to Help Manage Chronic Pain and/or Fatigue, for more information.) Ask your doctor which exercises are safe for you. He or she may even recommend you work with a physical therapist that will tailor an exercise program to best meet your needs.

Other things you can do yourself are: therapies for the mind and body such as meditation and yoga (non-traditional treatments often referred to as Complementary and Integrative medicine practices). These may help reduce stress, improve mood, and make you less aware of pain which will help you feel better. Again, your doctor can help you decide which techniques may be beneficial for you. You can refer to the WRIISC fact sheet on Complementary and Integrative Medicine for more information on meditation and yoga and other non-traditional treatments that are helpful in managing pain.

CARE FOR YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Chronic pain is often accompanied by undesired changes in your personal routine. These changes might include: loss of function, inability to work, and deterioration of personal relationships. Because of negative life changes, people in chronic pain have an increased risk for emotional health issues such as depression and anxiety. Your emotions may range from: fear, anger, and denial to hope and optimism.





Every person feels different emotions at different times, and sometimes emotions can make controlling pain more difficult. Taking care of the emotional aspects of chronic pain is a necessary part of treating your overall pain. Your doctor may want to prescribe medication for depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances and, may also suggest cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is based on the idea that emotions and behavior are influenced by our thoughts about a situation (e.g., “this is awful” vs. “this is uncomfortable”). By learning to modify the way we think about difficult situations, we can cope better and avoid acting in ways that make the situation worse. This is part of your doctor’s approach to treating pain as a “whole” not just the part that physically hurts. Some things you can do to help yourself deal with the emotional aspects of pain are to: keep a journal of your emotions, talk to loved ones about how you feel, or join a local support group.

If you are a Veteran with chronic pain consider how the above information relates to you and what the next steps are in gaining more control of your pain. Although it may not be possible for you to be completely free of pain, through pain management you can minimize pain and live the happier life you deserve.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **VA Pain Management**
<http://www.va.gov/painmanagement/>
- **Family Doctor**
<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/chronic-pain.html>
- “Chronic pain: Exercise can bring relief,” Mayo Clinic (April 23, 2001)

