

# Living with Chronic Pain

Usually, pain is useful information for our bodies - it can tell us when to avoid danger and how to keep ourselves safe. However, if we experience pain for a long time, our bodies can get used to telling us about the pain and may start to tell us that something is painful, even when it is not. This is called **chronic** or **persistent pain**. Chronic pain is very common in older adults.

If you live with chronic pain, you may feel like you are unable to live your life the way you want because of the pain. However, there are many things that you can do to help reduce the pain. This handout provides strategies that can help you get back to what you want to do, and lead the life you want.

## Keep Moving!

Pain does not always mean something is broken. It is important to move with chronic pain, even if you are sore, because moving helps remind your body that everything is okay and that it can relax. Over time, you will be able to do a little bit more, even with your pain.

### To start and keep yourself moving:

- Start slow, with something you know you can do. Walk around your house, raise your arms above your head, or stand up from a chair. Any safe movement counts!
- Try to be active for at least 30 minutes, 3 to 5 times a week. Even walking at a faster pace than normal counts!
- If you cannot do a full 30 minutes, start with 5 to 10 minutes, and then slowly increase this time, as you can tolerate. Rest for 30 minutes between activity sets.
- Try to keep a **moderate level of intensity** when exercising. This is the amount of effort you must exert during an activity to make you breathe harder and increase your heart rate.

- Exercise hard enough where you are able to maintain a conversation, but not too strenuous that you are gasping for air.

If you can still tolerate the pain and sing while exercising, you can increase your activity.

Remember to breathe, take regular breaks, and pay attention to your posture and pain.



### Stop exercising and speak to your doctor if you have:

- Nausea
- Fainting
- Severe fatigue
- A headache
- Blurred vision
- Chest pain
- Dizziness, or
- Abnormal shortness of breath and excessive sweating.

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## Eat Healthy

For your body to work right, it has to have good food. Even if you have a great car, it will not work without fuel!

What you eat and drink can affect your sleep, the way you move, your mood, and your energy level, so it is very important to make the best choices you can with your food.

### To make sure the food you eat will give you the energy you need:

- Keep well hydrated.
- Use less sweeteners and salt.
- Eat more plants and fibre.
- Read the labels of the food you buy.

## Relax and Stay Positive

Having pain can lead to stress. Unfortunately, this stress can make your pain even worse. By trying to relax and stay positive, you can teach yourself how to make the best of the situation you are in and make better decisions for your health.

### To keep calm and put you in control of your own pain:

- Spend time with family and friends.
- Make time for the activities you enjoy.
- Learn how to reframe your thoughts in a more positive way.
- If you have a busy schedule, make an effort to schedule in 'relaxation time' or time for yourself.



## Increase your Level of Social Engagement

Having chronic pain can make you shy away from social settings or activities. However, increasing your level of social engagement (how connected you are to other people) can improve your quality of life.

### To keep socially engaged, you can:

- Take part in activities that you enjoy, with people that you like to be around.
- Search for social engagement activities on the **Healthline - Health Services for Ontario** website - [www.thehealthline.ca](http://www.thehealthline.ca).
- Find places that you can go to for social activities and fun on the **Government of Ontario** website - [www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-yourcommunity](http://www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-yourcommunity).
- If you are unable to socialize in person, consider virtual visits and meetings to stay socially engaged.

## Get Enough Sleep

Impaired quality of sleep can affect your hunger, mood, ability to focus, and the amount of fatigue you experience (physical and mental). If you have a good night's sleep, you are setting yourself up for success, even before you get out of bed!

### To make sure you get a restful sleep:

- Do at least 30 minutes of physical activity during the day.
- If you typically take daily naps, consider keeping naps to less than 1 hour.
- Try not to consume any caffeine, alcohol, or nicotine in the afternoon.
- As it gets closer to bedtime, try to avoid phones, television, and 'screen time', in general.



- For the last hour of your day, try to do something you find relaxing. Read a book, take a warm shower, do some stretches; whatever works for you!
- Try to establish a routine - go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

## Take your Pain Medicine

While medicine may not be able to fix pain completely, it can help control your pain and keep you active for longer.

### To make sure your medicine is helping you to control your pain:

- Have an honest discussion with your doctor and pharmacist about your pain and your medicine. This ensures that they prescribe you the medicine that best suits your needs.
- Always take the medicine as prescribed. Never stop taking your medicine suddenly without talking to your doctor first.
- Tell your doctor about any changes you feel after starting your medicine. Some people react differently to different drugs, and your doctor may need to try different medicine or doses before finding what is right for you.

Remember that medicine is not a magic pill. While it can help, it is only one of many things you can do to reduce and manage your pain.

## Try Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Alternative therapies can be helpful in managing your chronic pain, especially when you combine it with education and exercise. **The following are 3 types of alternative therapies that you can try to help with your pain:**

### Acupuncture

Traditional Chinese acupuncture involves inserting needles into specific areas on the skin. This releases the body's natural pain-killing chemicals.

### Massage Therapy

Massage therapy can help decrease pain, improve function, and enhance the quality of life.

### Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a form of meditation. It focuses on what you are feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgement. In MBSR, you use tools like yoga, body scans, and meditation to help you manage chronic pain. You can also use MBSR for other conditions, such as anxiety, job or family stress, and high blood pressure.

A body scan can help you become more aware of your body and release tension. To do a body scan:

1. **Get in a comfortable position.** Lay down on your back. Sit in a chair if you are unable to safely get to the floor.
2. **Let your breathing slow down.** Try breathing from your belly instead of from your chest. Picture a balloon is inflating and deflating in your stomach with each breath you take.
3. **Bring awareness to your feet.** Slowly bring your attention down to your feet. Observe any sensations you may feel. If you notice any pain, acknowledge it, and any thoughts or emotions that accompany it. Gently breathe through it.



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To do a body scan (continued):

4. **Breathe into the tension.** If you notice any uncomfortable sensations, breathe into them. Try to visualize this tension leaving your body.
5. **Scan your entire body.** Continue to bring awareness to each area of your body, gradually moving up from your feet until you reach the top of your head. Breathe into any pain or tightness you feel.

## Useful resources

### Chronic Pain Clinics

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/chronic-pain-clinics>

### Chronic Pain Toronto

<https://www.chronicpaintoronto.com>

### Chronic Pain Resources – Central LHIN

<https://cep.health/download-file/1542304867.485711-88>

### Chronic Pain Rehabilitation

<https://www.torontocentralhealthline.ca/listservices.aspx?id=11480>

### Project ECHO (Online Pain Management Workshops, UHN)

<https://uhn.echoontario.ca/knowledge-base/online-support-for-people-with-chronic-pain-conditions>

### Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute (TAPMI)

<https://tapmipain.ca>

### MSBR Programs

This is not a full list of agencies and organizations. Humber River Health does not recommend one organization over another and is not responsible for the care and services provided.

### Toronto Mindfulness Community

[www.torontomindfulnesscommunity.org](http://www.torontomindfulnesscommunity.org)

### Toronto Memory Program

[www.torontomemoryprogram.com/stress-reduction](http://www.torontomemoryprogram.com/stress-reduction)

### S.T.A.R.T Clinic Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

[www.startclinic.ca/services/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-cognitive-therapy-groups](http://www.startclinic.ca/services/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-cognitive-therapy-groups)

### North York General Hospital

[www.cognitivetoronto.com/MBCT\\_Group.html](http://www.cognitivetoronto.com/MBCT_Group.html)  
[www.psychsyt.ca](http://www.psychsyt.ca)

### University Health Network

[www.uhn.ca/Transplant/Kidney\\_Transplant\\_Program/Transplant\\_Surgery/Kidney\\_Transplant\\_Guide/Documents/Mindfulness\\_application\\_form.pdf](http://www.uhn.ca/Transplant/Kidney_Transplant_Program/Transplant_Surgery/Kidney_Transplant_Guide/Documents/Mindfulness_application_form.pdf)

You can also visit Humber River Health's **Patient and Family Resource Centre** (located on Level 0, beside the Food Court) for a copy of any of the booklets listed here. We are open Monday to Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.