

Your Health Reference Sheet

Topic: Pain (Chronic)

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Chronic pain is one of the most costly and pervasive health problems in the United States. The following statistics are startling:

- \$90 billion is spent annually on direct medical expenses, loss of income, compensation payments, and legal charges associated with chronic pain.
- 48 million Americans suffer from chronic, severe headaches that can be disabling.
- \$3 billion is spent yearly on over-the-counter pain relievers.
- 40 million Americans suffer from arthritis pain.
- 13 million Americans can't perform routine activities because of pain.
- 65 percent of Americans under the age of 45 suffer from some kind of chronic pain.
- 85 percent of Americans will suffer from lower back pain by the age of 65.

Although these statistics are startling, what's even more startling is that the treatment of chronic pain hasn't moved beyond pain management to the treating of the psychological implications associated with it—implications such as hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, emotional stress, mental stress, feeling unsupported, and the repression of emotions.

General Description

Pain can be your body's best friend in the sense that it draws attention to an area in the body that's experiencing a problem. Pain identifies the general or precise location of a problem. It reveals the severity of the problem, and it even identifies the type of problem so you can treat the right area. Via pain, your body sends messages to the brain, alerting it that something's not right and that it needs to intervene and fix the problem. When the brain receives these pain messages, it responds in two ways: 1) it sends messages to the immune system that there's a problem, and, in turn, the immune system responds by activating an inflammatory response; and, 2) the brain begins releasing neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, which tell the area of the body in pain

that help is on its way. Through these two activities, the body begins the healing process and the pain begins to subside. Pain can also be your body's worst enemy. Prolonged pain weakens the immune system's ability to function optimally, saps the body of energy and strength, alters the personality, and creates a myriad of emotional and mental stressors. These stressors can cause irrational acts and decisions. More important, prolonged pain causes your world to shrink because you're not sure what you'll be able to do or if you'll be able to manage the pain. While painkillers free the body of pain and allow the brain to think clearly, meaning to think without fixating on the pain, all they really do is mask the pain or deaden certain body mechanisms so they can't function. Painkillers also create other problems because of their side effects and the fact that many are habit forming.

The body has four large pain centers, each controlling certain areas of the body. These pain centers are:

- The cerebrospinal area (neural afflictions, lower back pain, and leg cramping)
- The frontal lobe area of the brain (earaches, toothaches, headaches, and eye pain)
- The base of the brain (migraines, tension headaches, and shoulder and neck pain)
- The abdominal area (upper and lower digestive system, menstrual cramping, and elimination pain)

The body also has localized centers that pinpoint precisely only the areas being affected. Sometimes pain is felt in one area of the body when the problem causing it is located in another area. For example, inflammation of the gallbladder can create chronic pain in the shoulder.

There are many different kinds of pain as well as many different expressions of pain. Pain can be physical or emotional, as well as mental. Pain can express itself in the form of acute pain, chronic pain, localized pain, intermittent pain, throbbing pain, dull pain, spasmodic pain, sharp pain, shooting pain, or stabbing pain.

When pain lasts longer than six months, it's defined as chronic. This form of pain is very complex and can even be mysterious in terms of finding its underlying cause(s), because it develops gradually and has no clear beginning or ending. Although the pain may begin with an injury or illness, its continued presence and persistence are largely due to underlying psychological implications. It's for this reason that finding a single source of treatment can be tricky, and it's why doctors and healers often have to try a variety of curative steps before finding one that seems to manage or eliminate the pain.