



F a w z i a S u l t a n
REHABILITATION
INSTITUTE

Chronic Pain: The Pain That Persists

By Chris Sulway

Pain can be different depending on the source and duration. We may experience pain as a prick, tingle, sting, burn, or ache, but what exactly *is* pain?

Special nerve fibers located in every tissue of the body act as pain receptors: they trigger an electrical impulse that travels to the spinal cord. The spinal cord transmits that impulse to the brain where we interpret it as pain. When tissues become injured or inflamed, as with sunburn, a muscle tear, or any other injury, a chemical is released that makes the nerves much more sensitive, resulting in a heightened sense of pain.

Most of us have experience with "acute" pain. This is a direct response to an injury or an accident, and it will likely subside with time or after receiving treatment for the injury. "Chronic" pain, however, persists beyond the acute stage and can go on for months or even years. There may have been an initial incident--a sprained back or serious infection--or an ongoing cause of pain, such as arthritis or cancer, but some people suffer chronic pain in the absence of any past injury or evidence of body damage.

Common chronic pain complaints include headache, low back pain, cancer pain, arthritis pain, fibromyalgia, neurogenic pain (pain resulting from damage to the nerves), and psychogenic pain (pain not directly caused by disease or injury). The reasons why pain becomes chronic are complex and diverse: for example, there can be an underlying disease that is causing the pain; mechanical dysfunction in your spine or joints that won't resolve on its own; a pinching of a nerve; decreased blood supply to a muscle; or in some cases fatigue, stress, and psychological state can contribute to the pain.

Pain is a complex perception that differs enormously among individual people, even those who appear to have identical injuries or illnesses, and there is no way to tell how much pain a person has. No test can measure the intensity of pain, no imaging device can show pain, and no instrument can locate pain precisely.

The best aid to diagnosis is the patient's own description of the type, duration, and location of pain. Defining pain as sharp or dull, constant or intermittent, burning or aching may give the best clues to the cause. These descriptions are part of what is called the pain history, which is taken by the health professional during the preliminary examination of a patient in pain.

The first step in treating chronic pain is to try and identify the source. Many people with chronic pain try to “tough it out,” but persistent pain should never be ignored because it could signal disease or injury that will worsen if left untreated. If the root cause of the pain can be found then a treatment plan can be designed to correct the dysfunction and bring pain relief. However, occasionally the cause of pain is unknown or untreatable--in this case, treatment focuses more on pain management.

The most effective approach to the treatment of chronic pain is to have professionals from different health disciplines--for example doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, and surgeons--working as a team. Treatments strategies often include prescribed medications that can be complemented with effective non-medication-based treatments such as manual therapy to correct mechanical dysfunction that contributes to pain; electrical stimulation, which stimulates nerves and alters the brain's perception of pain; acupuncture, an ancient Chinese remedy that helps to control pain; exercise, which causes the release of endorphins, our body's natural pain killers; and biofeedback and relaxation techniques that help muscles relax and increases blood flow to the area. Psychotherapy can be done with trained professionals and is very effective for pain management. Invasive or surgical options are considered in severe cases or after conservative treatment options have failed.

People should not have to suffer with chronic pain; many can be helped if there is a complete physical assessment done by your physiotherapist to understand the cause, followed by the development of an effective treatment plan. Even if the cause is not known or cannot be reversed there are very effective pain management strategies to relieve symptoms. Pain is a debilitating condition that affects quality of life--if you experience chronic pain you should have it examined by skilled healthcare professionals; a physiotherapist is qualified to treat many pain related conditions and is a member of an effective multidisciplinary pain team.

For further information on this topic please contact the Fawzia Sultan Rehabilitation Institute (FSRI) in Hawally at 264-2862, or check out our website at www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com

Chris Sulway, is a Canadian physiotherapist and Managing Clinic Director at FSRI, specializing in orthopedic and sports injuries and is also a certified acupuncturist with the Acupuncture Foundation of Canada Institute. He can be reached at the FSR Institute in Hawally at 264-2862.