



# What is Chronic Pain?

## You are Not Alone

No one wants pain, but many people are affected by it. Chronic pain is one of the top reasons people go to the doctor. In fact, more people are affected by chronic pain than diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancer combined. Pain that continues after healing or longer than expected is called chronic pain. About 100 million Americans suffer from chronic pain. Chronic pain can be a very frustrating and disabling condition. However, most chronic pain can be treated, helping you return to activities you did before the pain began.

## Why do I Have Pain?

Pain is needed to protect our bodies and alert us of danger before we get injured. Pain occurs whenever the brain thinks the body is

in danger. This is helpful when it prevents you from doing something that could harm you. However, sometimes the pain system fails and things that should not hurt cause you pain. This happens because your brain believes you are in danger and is trying to protect you. This can happen even if nothing is truly wrong. The pain system involves all your body and can be so effective that you can't think, feel, or focus on anything else when you have severe pain.

## Your Brain on Chronic Pain

Your pain is unique to you - it is not the same as anyone else's pain. Most people don't have a scientific understanding of pain, and that's what we are here to explain to you. Danger sensors are all over your body and are always sending your brain information. If your brain senses danger, you will feel pain. Damage to

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your tissues causes inflammation that activates your danger sensors. In the short term, this allows healing and makes you more sensitive to pain.

Extra sensitivity makes things that are painful hurt even more and things that aren't painful to start hurting. **This is nearly always the main feature of chronic pain.** Your extra sensitive alarm system is telling your brain that there is more danger than there really is. This causes your brain to make more sensors and chemicals. This is how pain that started in one area can feel like it is spreading to other



areas. The longer the pain lasts, the more your brain changes. The good news is that this is reversible!

## Retraining Your Brain

To overcome pain and return to your normal life, it is important that you understand that **hurt does not always mean harm**, and that when you are in pain you are not necessarily hurting your body. Instead, your brain and nerves are using pain to protect you at all costs. If you understand this, you can decide what activities you want or need to do more of. You should determine how much activity you can do without debilitating pain. As you begin increasing activities, be gentle and plan to gradually increase them. As you become more confident, challenge yourself to do more difficult activities. You will find that you can complete your goal when you plan ahead. Be patient. Don't stress if your pain flares up; your alarm system is sensitive and it might take a while for you to retrain your brain. If you do this, eventually your brain will become less sensitive and your life will not be controlled by your pain- research shows that this can happen!

## Accept your limitations

If you already tried your best but still experiences function-limiting pain, accept your pain as any other chronic health condition and continue to be proactive at investing personally in getting it better. This approach will make you much less sensitive to pain and help you even if nothing else has changed.



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