

Prevention column

CHRONIC PAIN – FEBRUARY 2020

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is a disease that can occur following physical injuries, surgeries and for no apparent reason.

Based on many major studies of the general population, it is estimated that one in five Canadians suffers from chronic pain. **Two thirds of Canadians living with chronic pain** describe it as moderate (52%) to serious (14%), and 50% have been living with chronic pain for over 10 years.¹



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Chronic pain

is a disease that can occur following physical injuries, surgeries and for no apparent reason. The pain can also result from diseases such as arthritis, migraines, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, or spinal problems, among others.



“According to several large population-based surveys, an estimated **one in five Canadians lives with chronic pain**. Two thirds of Canadians living with chronic pain report their pain is moderate (52%) to severe (14%), and 50% have lived with chronic pain for over ten years.”¹

It's important to note that chronic pain affects people of all ages, from toddlers to the elderly! Chronic pain is defined as pain that persists for longer than three months or beyond a normal healing period. The pain can be present at all times, or only during certain periods. It can range from severe to weak, depending on the time of day.

How to recognize it

CHRONIC PAIN SYMPTOMS CAN RANGE FROM A SLIGHTLY NAGGING PAIN TO PAIN THAT IS COMPLETELY DEBILITATING. THE PAIN CAN BE COMPARED TO BEING STABBED WITH A KNIFE OR A BURNING OR A DULL AND ACHING MUSCULAR PAIN. THE AFFECTED AREAS CAN BE SENSITIVE OR PAINFUL TO THE TOUCH AND THE PAIN CAN INCREASE AFTER PERFORMING CERTAIN MOVEMENTS. CHRONIC PAIN IS OFTEN NOT STATIC.

CHRONIC PAIN IN CANADA

“As with many chronic illnesses, chronic pain is not distributed equally among Canadians. Biological, psychological, social, and other factors that influence how we experience pain also influence who will develop chronic pain in the first place. Often the occurrence of disease, as well as the severity of illness, is higher in populations affected by social inequities and discrimination including those living in poverty, Indigenous Peoples, certain ethnic communities, and women.”²

The prevalence of chronic pain increases steadily with age in adults, making this disorder a major health issue for older adults. Approximately one in three Canadians 65 years of age and older lives with chronic pain.³ Given the aging population in Canada, we can expect a larger proportion of Canadians to be living with chronic pain in the coming years.”

Chronic pain is a disease in its own right and a serious public health problem, and the “estimated combined direct and indirect costs of chronic pain in Canada would total approximately \$56 to \$60 billion per year.”⁴

The pain can be nociceptive when caused by a musculoskeletal injury, or a neuropathic injury if the nervous system is affected at several levels. Chronic pain can happen to anyone; children, teenagers, adults and especially the elderly. It has significant impacts on the physical and mental health of those suffering from it and a tremendous financial burden on society, the family, loved ones and of course, the person affected. To regain functionality and a certain quality of life, those affected need to learn to manage the disease themselves and get the support they need as they strive to get the disease under control. ■



LEARNING TO LIVE WITH PAIN IS NOT BEING
RESIGNED TO IT, MUCH LESS GIVING UP.

Chronic pain can also...

Chronic pain causes people to feel discouraged, sad, afraid and even angry. It completely disrupts their lives. These emotions are normal, but can become harmful over time. Not only do they add to your suffering, but can increase the pain and wear down your willingness to face it.

One of the first emotions we feel when pain persists is concern because we don't understand what's happening to our body. This is when helplessness and anxiety set in. You start worrying that the pain will increase over time or wonder if you'll have the resources required to face what comes next. Being concerned is not a problem, but being paralyzed by it is. The emotions become paralyzing when they prevent you from fully living your life. The feeling of losing control is often the result of not having all the resources you need to combat the challenges you're living through. You feel isolated...

Experiencing the losses caused by living with chronic pain is similar to mourning the loss of a loved one. These phases are characterized by shock, denial, the search for answers, sadness and lastly, acceptance, which is completely normal and understandable. What's more, the duration of each phase is different for everyone.

When the pain persists and feels like it will never subside, you shouldn't dwell on what you can no longer do, but focus on what you can still do! ■

Changing your LIFESTYLE

Adapting to the pain
and being as happy as
you can be!

Why not learn to perform certain activities differently, use new techniques for your daily tasks and even explore new leisure activities? You might even discover new activities that you never thought of before. In short, it's about finding a way to adapt to your new reality with your current abilities and not the ones you had before the pain set in. This will allow you to maintain or improve your self-esteem. More confidence in yourself allows you to remain more optimistic!

Just because you're learning to live with the pain doesn't mean you're resigned to it, much less giving up. Learning to live with the pain is accepting, but not being resigned to it. That's how some people, at a certain point, decide to put their energy in their quality of life and stop looking, at any cost, for a miracle solution that will make their pain disappear. For example, for one person acceptance can mean adapting to the pain, whereas it could be taking measures to be happy despite the pain for another person. ■

WHAT DOES "ACCEPTING PAIN" MEAN FOR YOU?

Acceptance is not:

- Despairing or giving up.
- Ceasing to look for miracle treatments.
- Giving up on recovering at all costs.
- An end in itself.

Acceptance is:

- Leading an active and engaged life despite the pain.
- Taking a realistic approach toward pain.
- Finding a balanced approach between actions that provide pain relief and those geared toward a better quality of life.
- A process, an action that takes place each day.

OVERCOME YOUR FEAR OF MOVING and boost your confidence

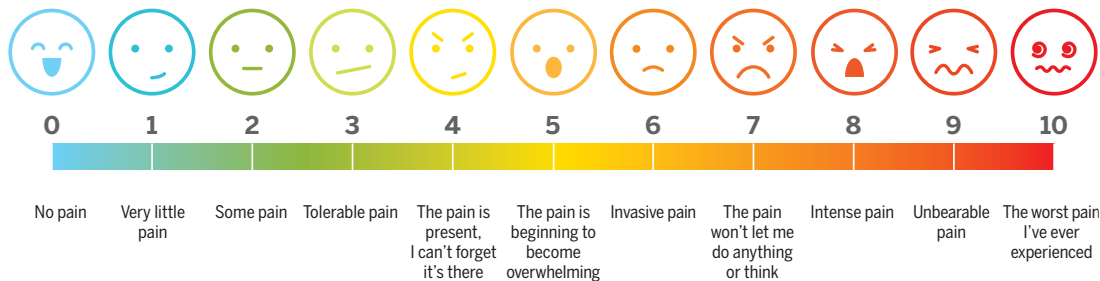
To overcome the fear and move and become more confident, you must take things slowly, one step at a time. Doing activities you enjoy, talking to people who don't judge your situation and are a positive presence in your life, trying physical exercises you're comfortable with, following your physiotherapist's and doctor's advice, and above all, persisting, without overdoing it, in carrying out your personal activities and physical exercise. You have to go gradually, at your own pace.

It's not realistic to think the pain will disappear completely with exercise. The goal is to increase your mobility, be more flexible, manage the effort required to be able to do the activity for a longer period, which in turn allows you to better manage your emotions and mood, and sleep better, too. You'll be proud of yourself!



PAIN SCALE CHART

Select the face that matches your pain level



The Pain Scale Chart helps you identify the pain you're feeling through a series of numbered cartoon faces moving from 0 (smiling and pain-free) to 10 (weeping in agony). The chart helps others understand, including health professionals, the level of pain being experienced and how you're coping with it. If you intend to use this chart, we suggest that you place it on the refrigerator, carry it with you or stick it on the office door so that the people around you get a better understanding of what you're living through. ■



Does chronic pain affect you or a loved one? Are you a Quebec resident?

The Quebec Association of Chronic Pain (AQDC) is there for you! It's an association of patients for patients and their loved ones. There are over **25 support groups** throughout Quebec and more than **340 annual group meetings**. Call the information and support line for patients living with chronic pain at **1 855 DOULEUR** or 1 855 368-5387 or go to **douleurchronique.org/?lang=en**. ■

1. Schopflocher et coll., 2011; Reitsma et coll., 2011; Steingrimsdottir et coll., 2017
 2. Allan & Smylie, 2015; IOM, 2011
 3. Schopflocher et coll., 2011; Reitsma et coll., 2011
 4. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/about-health-canada/public-engagement/external-advisory-bodies/canadian-pain-task-force/report-2019.html>