

11 Tips for Living With Chronic Pain

In this article

1. Learn deep breathing or meditation to help you relax.
2. Reduce stress in your life. Stress intensifies chronic pain.
3. Boost chronic pain relief with the natural endorphins from exercise.
4. Cut back on alcohol, which can worsen sleep problems.
5. Join a support group. Meet others living with chronic pain.
6. Don't smoke. It can worsen chronic pain.
7. Track your pain level and activities every day.
8. Learn biofeedback to decrease migraine and tension headache pain.
9. Get a massage for chronic pain relief.
10. Eat a healthy diet if you're living with chronic pain.
11. Find ways to distract yourself from pain so you enjoy life more.

1. Learn deep breathing or meditation to help you relax.

Deep breathing and meditation are techniques that help your body relax, which may ease pain. Tension and tightness seep from muscles as they receive a quiet message to relax.

Although there are many ways to meditate, the soothing power of repetition is at the heart of some forms of meditation. Focusing on the breath, ignoring thoughts, and repeating a word or phrase -- a mantra -- causes the body to relax. While you can learn meditation on your own, it helps to take a class.

Deep breathing is also a relaxation technique. Find a quiet location, a comfortable body position, and block out distracting thoughts. Then, imagine a spot just below your navel. Breathe into that spot, filling your abdomen with air. Let the air fill you from the abdomen up, then let it out, like deflating a balloon.

2. Reduce stress in your life. Stress intensifies chronic pain.

Negative feelings like depression, anxiety, stress, and anger can increase the body's sensitivity to pain. By learning to take control of stress, you may find some relief from chronic pain.

Several techniques can help reduce stress and promote relaxation. Listening to soothing, calming music can lift your mood -- and make living with chronic pain more bearable. There are even specially designed relaxation tapes or CDs for this. Mental imagery relaxation (also called guided imagery) is a form of mental escape that can help you feel peaceful. It involves creating calming, peaceful images in your mind. Progressive muscle relaxation is another technique that promotes relaxation.

3. Boost chronic pain relief with the natural endorphins from exercise.

Endorphins are brain chemicals that help improve your mood while also blocking pain signals. Exercise has another pain-reducing effect -- it strengthens muscles, helping prevent re-injury and further pain. Plus, exercise can help keep your weight down, reduce heart disease risk, and control blood sugar levels -- especially important if you have diabetes. Ask your doctor for an exercise routine that is right for you. If you have certain health conditions, like diabetic neuropathy, you will need to be careful about the types of activities you engage in; your doctor can advise you on the best physical activities for you.

4. Cut back on alcohol, which can worsen sleep problems.

Pain makes sleep difficult, and alcohol can make sleep problems worse. If you're living with chronic pain, drinking less or no alcohol can improve your quality of life.

5. Join a support group. Meet others living with chronic pain.

When you're with people who have chronic pain and understand what you're going through, you feel less alone. You also benefit from their wisdom in coping with the pain.

Also, consider meeting with a mental health professional. Anyone can develop depression if he or she is living with chronic pain. Getting counseling can help you learn to cope better and help you avoid negative thoughts that make pain worse -- so you have a healthier attitude. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

6. Don't smoke. It can worsen chronic pain.

Smoking can worsen painful circulation problems and increase risk of heart disease and cancer.

7. Track your pain level and activities every day.

To effectively treat your pain, your doctor needs to know how you've been feeling between visits. Keeping a log or journal of your daily "pain score" will help you track your pain. At the end of each day, note your pain level on the 1 to 10 pain scale. Also, note what activities you did that day. Take this log book to every doctor visit --

to give your doctor a good understanding of how you're living with chronic pain and your physical functioning level.

8. Learn biofeedback to decrease migraine and tension headache pain.

Through biofeedback, it's possible to consciously control various body functions. It may sound like science fiction, but there is good evidence that biofeedback works -- and it's not hard to master.

Here's how it works: You wear sensors that let you "hear" or "see" certain bodily functions like pulse, digestion, body temperature, and muscle tension. The squiggly lines and/or beeps on the attached monitors reflect what's going on inside your body. Then you learn to control those squiggles and beeps. After a few sessions, your mind has trained your biological system to learn the skills.

9. Get a massage for chronic pain relief.

Massage can help reduce stress and relieve tension -- and is being used by people living with all sorts of chronic pain, including back and neck pain.

10. Eat a healthy diet if you're living with chronic pain.

A well-balanced diet is important in many ways -- aiding your digestive process, reducing heart disease risk, keeping weight under control, and improving blood sugar levels. To eat a low-fat, low-sodium diet, choose from these: fresh fruits and vegetables; cooked dried beans and peas; whole-grain breads and cereals; low-fat cheese, milk, and yogurt; and lean meats.

