



# What is chronic pain?

## **NHS Lanarkshire Chronic Pain Service**

This is an information leaflet for people who have been told they have chronic pain including chronic low back pain and chronic widespread pain, also known as Fibromyalgia.





This will explain more about chronic pain, how this is different from acute pain and a bit more about how chronic pain is managed. We know that understanding chronic pain can help you manage it better.

## **ACUTE PAIN AND CHRONIC PAIN ARE DIFFERENT**

Most people think of pain as acute injury related pain, meaning there is damage to the body but this is not always the case.

Acute pain from an injury such as a burn or a broken leg, is caused by your nerves releasing chemicals to alert your body to potential harm or pain; this usually lasts a short time and can be managed with appropriate pain relief or modifying activity.

For example, if we touch something hot, the pain that we get is a useful message which tells us to take our hand away and may make us afraid of touching hot things in the future.

These nerves are supposed to switch off when the body has healed... but sometimes they don't.



## Chronic pain

Chronic pain is different, both in terms of what happens to the body, and what it's like to live with it. Here is how some people describe it:

*'It's the additional factors. It's not just the pain. The pain in itself, I suppose, can be managed, but it's all the things that come with it'*

*'my brain works at a hundred miles an hour, but my body doesn't let me do that'.*

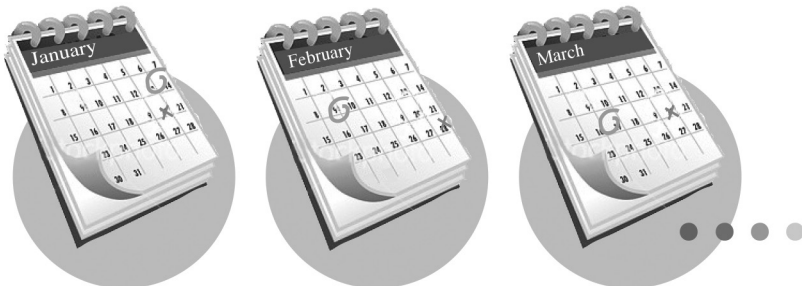
*'this isn't fair, you know, this isn't fair and I didn't ask for this'*

*'They've never actually come back and said this is what is wrong with you and this is why you're getting chronic pain.'*

*'To me I feel like normal life, has ceased..... it's like it's only a dream.'*

*'I get up in the morning and it's the same routine day after day. I feel like I'm a hamster in a wheel. It's the same thing all the time. It doesn't really vary. It's quite a staid life really because of my pain and that, because you're not out, mixing'*

Chronic pain lasts after tissues have healed or because of no injury at all. After we have had pain for three months it is often called chronic pain or persistent pain and this can continue for years. Sometimes the way the body processes pain changes biologically; this can lead to the pain being long term, continuous and sometimes widespread such as in Fibromyalgia.



We know once we have had pain for a while it is unlikely that this will simply go. This is because of the changes in our nervous system and the way the body processes pain. Chronic pain is unlikely to be the result of ongoing damage or harm.

There isn't a specific test for chronic pain (like the doctor taking your blood pressure), and X-Rays and MRI scans won't tell you how much pain you are in. This is upsetting for some people because they can sometimes feel abandoned or let down by healthcare staff. It also means that other people can't see your pain. Lack of a 'specific' diagnosis is common in chronic pain.

Chronic pain is surprisingly common. Around 1 in 5 people in Scotland have chronic pain to some degree with about 1 in 20 having more severe chronic pain.

We know that chronic pain changes how our pain processing systems work. Our pain systems are part of central nervous system processing. These systems become much more sensitive and better at telling you about pain. This is brought about by changes in the systems and is not caused by something specific such as an individual damaged disc, nerve, or muscle. However, this certainly does not mean that the pain is all in your mind, although it does involve the brain processing systems!

It's a bit like having a fire alarm that has gone off, perhaps being triggered by an injury to the body and it just keeps ringing, even when the fire is put out; the body has healed but the pain sensations are still activated.



# CHRONIC PAIN IS A VICIOUS CIRCLE

Chronic pain can become a vicious circle for some people. As your pain continues, your ability to do every day tasks can become limited and muscles can become out of condition. Stresses, anxiety and tension can also become more of a problem, which in turn can make the pain feel worse.



# MANAGEMENT FOR CHRONIC PAIN

The goal is to turn people into expert managers of their chronic pain, to regain control and have a better quality of life.

‘Chronic pain’ has been recognised as a long term health condition by the Scottish Government since 2008 and this means we need to think about long term management, rather than a short term approach where people often feel they are passed ‘from pillar to post’ and end up on an increasing amount of tablets.

If we don’t know how to manage the pain, the pain can often manage us, making us feel it is out of control. You may need to be assessed and treated by a variety of healthcare professionals to manage your chronic pain effectively. Management often includes learning and understanding how chronic pain works within your own body which can help you to identify activities and develop daily plans that you can achieve, recognising what is important for you and possible limitations. It is helpful, but can often be challenging to find the level of activity and exercise that is right for you. Managing the way the pain can affect your mood and motivation is also an important part of management.



## WHAT DO PEOPLE WITH CHRONIC PAIN SAY ABOUT MANAGEMENT?

Here are what some people have said about management, after they have finished:

*'I get more stuff done slowly in stages that I feel comfortable with and then I feel quite pleased with myself cos then I've done it so I'm slightly happier in a way with how things are going'*

*'Before, I couldn't accept it. I was always pushing myself..... Making it worse, always in pain, always miserable.'*

*'yeah I'm still in pain but I'm more relaxed because I'm not constantly looking around for a solution to my pain, you know. I'm not wondering... oh, I wonder if anybody's discovered the magic pill today.'*

*'if I'm panicking about something or if the pain's just too intense and I'm getting all panicky inside, I'm like 'aaaah' and 'right, breathe, breathe' until I calm myself down again and I didn't know how to do that before.'*

*'learning the techniques, like the breathing and, 'calm down, slow down, pace yourself'..... I'm really pacing myself now. I've stopped beating myself up now cos I've learned to accept it. I think well, it's not really my fault .....I'm happier now..... I'm more settled now. Before I was never sleeping but now I am.'*



Some people find it helpful to understand their pain more fully than this. We recommend the following resources for understanding your pain more:

### **Online:**

There is a NHS Lanarkshire website for Chronic Pain which has different information and resources: <https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk/services/chronic-pain/>

### **NHS Inform**

Chronic pain: HYPERLINK "<http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/chronic-pain>" [www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/chronic-pain](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/chronic-pain)

<https://www.flippinpain.co.uk/understanding-pain/>

The following site has a range of video clips of interviews with information. It includes a doctor giving a medical explanation of chronic pain and also people with chronic pain talking about their own experiences

<https://healthtalk.org/chronic-pain/messages-to-others-about-chronic-pain>

<https://painconcern.org.uk> - provides information about pain in different formats, videos, podcasts, leaflets, forums and helplines

### **Book**

Explain Pain - available at local libraries

People learn how to manage their pain effectively in different ways. It's worth considering what way you like to learn? Do you prefer online resources, reading a book, group learning, listening to information, speaking to someone? You can speak with your Physiotherapist, GP or Pharmacist about what might be the best option for you.

We have created a short video for you to watch if you have been referred to NHS Lanarkshire's Chronic Pain Service highlighting what you can expect: <https://vimeo.com/551967136>

There are a lot of resources out there, we recommend the following:

### **Online resources:**

10 Footsteps to living well with Chronic Pain is an interactive online resource: <http://my.livewellwithpain.co.uk/ten-footsteps>

### **Chronic Pain Self help guide**

HYPERLINK "<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/chronic-pain-self-help-guide>" [www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/chronic-pain-self-help-guide](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/chronic-pain-self-help-guide)

### **Guide to keep active with Chronic Pain**

<https://ppa.csp.org.uk/content/keeping-active>

### **Group learning (currently online)**

A national charity that delivers professionally led self-management pain education in the community - usually available in Coatbridge, Wishaw, East Kilbride and Larkhall.

HYPERLINK "<http://www.painassociation.com/>" [www.painassociation.com](http://www.painassociation.com)

Speak to your health professional about access to local leisure services to help you build up your activity levels or maintain fitness levels in a supported environment.

## **Books:**

Living well with pain and Illness – Vidyamala Burch

Overcoming Chronic Pain – Frances Cole

Living Beyond your pain – JoAnne Dahl are available within Lanarkshire libraries: North Lanarkshire Libraries: <https://culturenl.co.uk/elibrary>

South Lanarkshire Libraries: HYPERLINK “<http://www.sllclibrary.co.uk/cgibin/spydus.exe/MSGTRN/OPAC/JOIN>” [www.sllclibrary.co.uk/cgibin/spydus.exe/MSGTRN/OPAC/JOIN](http://www.sllclibrary.co.uk/cgibin/spydus.exe/MSGTRN/OPAC/JOIN)

It’s normal for you to feel more anxious and/ or depressed if living with pain - if you feel you need support with this there are lots of resources available please do speak to your health professional about this.

Some people have found the following resource helpful: HYPERLINK “<http://www.lanarkshiremindmatters.scot.nhs.uk>” [www.lanarkshiremindmatters.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.lanarkshiremindmatters.scot.nhs.uk)

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**NHS Lanarkshire** - for local services and the latest health news visit [www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)  
NHS Lanarkshire General  
Enquiry Line: 0300 30 30 243

**NHS inform** - The national health information service for Scotland.  
[www.nhsinform.co.uk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk)  
Tel No: 0800 22 44 88

If you need this information in another language or format, please e-mail: Translation.  
[Services@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:Services@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)



[www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk)

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