



Take Charge of Your Pain

Suffer from stiff joints, muscle tension or other aches and pains? You're certainly not alone.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than half of older Americans have some sort of pain. Forty percent report chronic joint pain. While the reasons behind chronic pain are many, so are the methods to manage it. You can help pave your own path to relief by exploring different options and staying open to new approaches.

"Often times I see patients who have not fully explored all the treatment options," says Kaliq Chang, MD. Dr. Chang is a spine and neck pain management specialist at Atlantic Spine Center. "The patient must advocate for him or herself and seek out other treatments that may help."

Ready to take charge? You may want to try some of the pain management options below.

Diet

What you eat can affect pain. "The best diet for anybody, including those in chronic pain, is a diet rich in vegetables, fruits and whole grains, and a small to moderate amount of meat," says Dr. Chang. The *Journal of Musculoskeletal Pain* notes that leafy vegetables and fresh fruits can help fight swelling and ease muscle and joint pain. Alternatively, foods high in salt, sugar and fat can ramp up swelling and make symptoms worse, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Exercise

While chronic pain can make it harder to get moving, exercise itself can be an effective way to ease those aches. “For most joint pain I recommend my patients get into a pool,” says Kavita Sharma, MD, a pain management physician with Manhattan Pain & Sports Associates. “Swimming keeps the joints moving, but with low impact, so there’s less pain and they’re still strengthening the joints.”

The ancient Chinese practice of Tai chi is another gentle, yet effective option. “Each movement leads into another, so your body is in constant motion, which keeps your joints lubricated,” says Dr. Sharma. Tai chi is often available free or at a low cost through local libraries and community centers.

Yoga may help with flexibility and strength using a series of postures, breathing exercises and meditation. These can significantly reduce arthritic and lower back pain, according to NIH.

No matter what you choose, regular exercise may help you lose weight. And losing weight is another way to help reduce back, knee and other joint and muscle pain.

Physical Therapy

Based on your symptoms, health history and lifestyle goals, physical therapists may be able to help find the cause of your pain. Treatment may include strength and conditioning exercises, stretching and hands-on therapy (like massage) of the joints and soft tissue.

Nerve Block Therapies

Local anesthetics, proteins or steroids can be injected into soft tissue or joints to block nerves from sending pain signals to the brain. Johns Hopkins Medicine notes that while injections can work well, the effects aren’t permanent. This treatment is often used to help with severe pain during early recovery until other treatment options take effect.

Medication

According to the National Institute on Aging, acetaminophen can work for mild to moderate pain. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, can help with swelling and inflammation. Narcotics block or dampen pain signals to the brain but pose higher chances of addiction or overdose — especially with long-term use. Other diet and lifestyle treatments are often recommended first.

Alternative approaches can also help with pain. While there hasn’t been enough research to show this for certain, they are effective for many and may be able to help you, too. These approaches—which are meant to manage day-to-day pain rather than be used as a lone treatment—may include:

- **Acupuncture** uses very thin needles to stimulate specific points on the body. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health notes that acupuncture can reduce shoulder and neck pain. This also goes for pain from headaches and arthritis.
- **Massage therapy** can soothe neck, shoulder and low back pain, as well as curb anxiety and boost your mood.
- **Chiropractic care** practitioners use special instruments or their hands to fix misalignments in the spine. This has been shown to be effective in treating pain, particularly in the low back and neck.

- **Mindfulness-based meditation** uses breathing techniques and imagery to focus on and embrace living in the moment. A 2015 study by the Journal of Neuroscience shows that mindfulness can change the way our brain perceives pain. This can significantly reduce pain and discomfort.
- **Stretching** the soft tissues around the joints can help lower the chance of pain, as well-stretched muscles are less prone to injury. Stretch the back, abdominal and buttock muscles regularly. Be gentle and don't bounce, as that can hurt the muscle tissue.

Be open with your doctor about any pain you're experiencing so that he or she can determine the right course of action. It's also important to check with your doctor first before starting a new treatment or exercise program. He or she can help determine the best options for you.