

Managing your pain

www.arthritis.org.nz

ARTHRITIS 
NEW ZEALAND

ENABLING A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

KAIPONAPONA AOTEAROA

Te whakapiki i te kounga ora

Did you know?

- Arthritis affects one in six New Zealanders over the age of 15 years
- Arthritis is the most common cause of chronic pain
- Anxiety and stress can make pain worse
- Exercise, joint support, medications and relaxation all are important in dealing with arthritis pain.

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Living with pain can be the hardest part of having arthritis.

Arthritis pain can be caused by:

- inflammation, the process that causes heat and swelling in your joints
- damage to the joints, and
- muscle tension, from trying to protect joints from painful movements.



For some conditions, such as fibromyalgia, the cause of the pain is not fully understood.

The first step is to find out which type of arthritis you have, this will determine your treatment. A team of health professionals including your GP, rheumatologist, arthritis educator, physiotherapist, occupational therapist and perhaps a pain management specialist can help you to create an achievable plan to manage your pain.

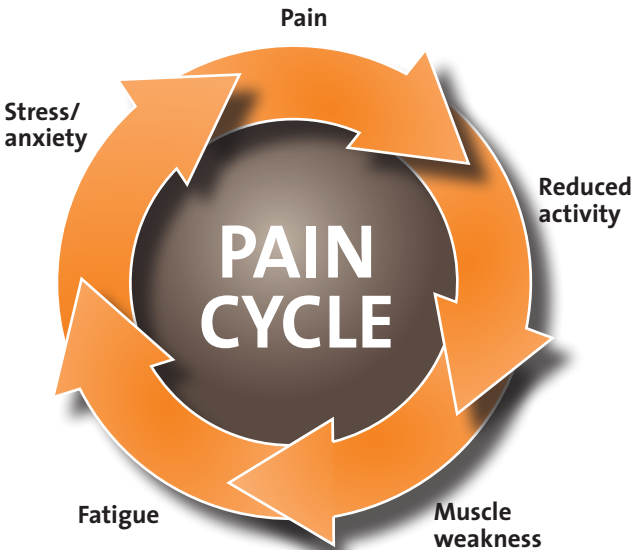
Experiencing chronic pain

- Understandably you may be worried about the pain and even avoid some activities because they are painful or you think that they may cause more damage to your joints
- You may feel as if your world has changed and is no longer fun because your pain limits your ability to enjoy things
- You may withdraw from your friends, family and social activities, as you feel self conscious or vulnerable
- You may have given exercise a really good try but felt more pain afterwards or you might feel unsure about where to start
- You may not feel confident in yourself anymore, and see yourself as a sick person
- You may feel that you are not able to live a healthy life.

The pain cycle

Pain is a normal complex human experience. However in arthritis, pain can become a serious issue causing stress, anxiety and depression. Fatigue is another common symptom of arthritis, which can make it more difficult to deal with pain.

Pain, stress, fatigue and feeling down or depressed will often make your pain worse. This cycle is known as the 'Pain cycle'.



The good news is that this pain cycle can be broken by using some of the strategies described overleaf.

What can I do to manage my pain?

Pain may limit some of the things you do, but it doesn't have to control your life. Everybody is different, so be prepared to try different self-management techniques until you find what works best for you.

Exercise

Research has shown that regular stretching and strengthening exercises can help reduce pain. It also keeps your joints moving, strengthens muscles to support your joints, reduces stress and improves sleep. Choose exercise that you enjoy. A health professional (such as a physiotherapist) can help you work out a programme suitable for you.

Remember

Start gently and build up slowly so that you give your body a positive experience of doing exercise. If you have not been doing exercise for a while, it is normal to experience some aches and pains as you begin using muscles that haven't been used in a while.

Joint support

The way you undertake your activities during the day can also affect your pain. You can manage your pain by pacing yourself and limiting repetitive or forceful movements. A wide range of aids and gadgets are available for people with arthritis. They can make tasks easier and preserve your energy. Talk to an occupational therapist about aids that might be suitable for you.

Dealing with emotions

Feelings such as anger, guilt, fear, isolation and frustration are all common and normal experiences of pain. Accepting your pain is the first step forward. If you find it difficult to deal with these feelings you may need to talk with your health professional.

Medications

Medications can be helpful in managing pain when they are used in combination with other strategies. Do not wait for the pain to build before taking your medications and take as prescribed to receive the most benefit.

1) Analgesics (pain relievers) are often the first medicine your doctor will recommend to help with pain.

Paracetamol is a simple pain reliever that can ease mild to moderate pain. There are also stronger pain relievers, such as a combination of paracetamol and codeine, tramadol and a range of morphine-like medicines. Pain relievers act on the nervous system to reduce pain. They do not relieve other symptoms such as joint swelling or stiffness.

2) Non Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) reduce inflammation, joint swelling and stiffness. They can also relieve pain that is not controlled by analgesics alone. There are many different types of NSAIDs available, such as naproxen, diclofenac and ibuprofen. They can be taken with paracetamol.

Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking NSAIDs if you have high blood pressure, kidney or heart problems as they may cause serious side effects compared to paracetamol. One of the common side effects of NSAIDs is bleeding of the stomach and upper intestine.

Corticosteroids such as prednisone, are used as part of a strategy to control inflammation in arthritis.

Other medications used for inflammatory arthritis include Disease Modifying drugs such as methotrexate, and biologics. These medications decrease pain and inflammation and also help to stop the progression of arthritis.

For more information visit:

Australian Rheumatology Association –
www.rheumatology.org.au

Arthritis Research UK – www.arthritisresearchuk.org

Medsafe – www.medsafe.govt.nz

Heat and cold

Heat relaxes your muscles and stimulates blood circulation. You could try a warm bath, sauna or placing a heat pack or hot water bottle over the painful area for 15 minutes.

Cold numbs the painful area and reduces swelling. Applying cold treatments, such as ice packs, to the painful area for 15 minutes may be especially useful for hot, swollen joints, such as during a 'flare'.

You can repeat heat or cold treatments throughout the day. Make sure the temperature of your skin has returned to normal before re-applying; protect skin by placing a hand towel between skin and heat or ice pack.

Ask your doctor or physiotherapist whether heat or cold is best for you.

Relaxation and distraction

People often find that stress can make their pain worse.

Relaxation techniques, such as meditation, deep breathing and visualisation (mental pictures), can help to reduce stress and muscle tension. These techniques need to be practised and you may have to try several of them before you find one that works for you.

Distraction: Focusing your attention on something other than your pain can also help you cope with pain. This might involve exercising, reading, listening to music or other methods to take your mind away from your pain.

Try to include relaxation and distraction techniques into the activities that you do every day.



Complementary therapies

Massage – many people with arthritis find massage a useful way to relax and reduce muscle tension. Make sure the massage therapist has experience working with people who have arthritis.

Acupuncture – is an ancient Chinese practice of putting small, thin needles into the skin at specific points on the body to block the pain signal. Some people with osteoarthritis may find it useful alongside other proven treatments.

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) – application of very mild electric pulses to block pain messages going from the painful area to your brain. TENS can be useful for chronic pain, check with your physiotherapist whether this treatment is appropriate for you.

Capsaicin – is the active component of chilli peppers and is used in many creams to relieve pain. Remember not to use capsaicin if you have broken skin, skin irritation, or previous allergic reactions to capsaicin.

Key points:

- Pain doesn't have to rule your life
- Exercise every day
- Take medications as prescribed
- Include relaxation and distraction to your daily routine
- Prevent pain from building by breaking up activities
- There are good days and bad days, have a plan for bad days
- There are NO rights or wrongs – find what works for you.



For more information and support visit:

- www.arthritis.org.nz
- www.paintoolkit.org
- www.healthnavigator.org.nz
- www.calm.auckland.ac.nz
- www.lifeline.co.nz

Where can I learn more?

www.arthritis.org.nz

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