



Understanding your pain session – Acute and chronic pain

This leaflet summarises the key information presented during the Understanding Your Pain session at the Ipswich Hospital Pain Management Unit.

Acute pain

- Short term – lasts less than three months.
- Injury/Disease triggers pain nerves to 'switch on' and we feel pain. When the body heals, pain nerves 'switch off' and the pain stops.
- Pain messages are protective and useful because they signal damage and promote behaviour which aids healing.
- Nervous system works normally.
- Pain results from damage, harm or injury in the body – pain signals that something is wrong.
- Variations in pain level usually represent improvement/ worsening in underlying condition.
- Limited physical, psychological, or social knock on effects which do not usually cause problems.
- Usually simple to understand and treat.
- Pain relief medication works well to reduce pain.
- Usually an identifiable cause underlying the pain.
- Well understood by society.
- Professionals well trained in acute pain.

Chronic pain

- Long term – lasts more than three months.
- Physical trigger causes pain nerves to switch on.
- Chemical or hormonal release causes.
- Pain nerves to remain switched on/pain system to remain activated.
- Pain system to become highly sensitised.
- Pain is not a signal of damage but results from an activated, sensitised pain system.
- Is not useful or protective.
- Does not usually mean there is something wrong.
- Variations in pain level caused by factors which aggravate or calm the nervous system.
- Pain system can become increasingly sensitive over time if consistently aggravated.
- Extensive, complex 'knock on' effects which can cause further problems/pain.
- More complex to understand and treat.
- Pain relief medication often only 'takes the edge off' pain.
- Precise cause not always known.
- Not well understood by family, friends and society.
- Not well understood by all professionals.



Short term or acute pain

Our nervous system is made up of the brain, the spinal cord, and the nerves. Our pain system is part of our nervous system, and it is very complex. When you injure your body, messages are carried to your brain via your nervous system and then interpreted by your brain. When this happens you become aware of pain.

Pain has a very important function – it helps you to remove yourself from danger and limit your normal activities to allow healing to take place. Once your body has healed, you can gradually return to normal activities.

This is how our bodies normally work when experiencing an acute or short term pain (like a cut, broken bone, sore throat or toothache). In these circumstances the amount of pain that you are in is closely related to the amount that the body has been injured.

During a treatment up until now you may have found that your pain has been viewed as similar to an acute injury pain (such as a sprained ankle or cut to your hand). Medical professionals will have looked for signs of physical damage in your body associated with the pain that you are experiencing.

Long term (chronic) pain

Advances in pain science show that acute pain is not the only type of pain. Sometimes pain continues for a longer period of time, and this type of pain is called chronic pain. When we have chronic pain, our pain system works in a different way than when we have acute pain.

In some cases, chronic pain can develop without any injury, so there is no tissue damage involved. In others the pain goes on long after the tissue healing should have occurred. In either case, resting and reducing activity does not help to relieve the pain.

In chronic pain, at the point of injury, disease, surgery or illness, the pain nerves switched themselves on. There is then a chemical or hormonal released in the body (although doctors are not sure why this happens). This chemical release causes the pain nerves to stay switched on and for the nervous system to become over-sensitive. This means that you keep feeling pain, but without further damage happening to the body. The problem is the pain itself. So, although the chronic pain hurts (often a great deal) and the pain is very real, it does not mean that there is ongoing damage being done to your body.

Long-lasting pain affects most areas of someone's life. Some of these changes might be physical, for example posture, how we move, how strong we are. Some of these changes can be how we feel, such as to our mood, and some of the changes can be to how we behave, such as what we do in our spare time and throughout the day. All of these changes can impact on how we manage the pain.

Further information

Understanding your Pain and what to do about it in less than 5 minutes (YouTube video)



Health talk: what is Chronic Pain



Tame the beast – it's time to resist persistent pain (YouTube video)



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