



Patient & Family Guide  
2020

# Pain and Lowering Tension

Pain Self-Management Program



[www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca)

# Pain and Lowering Tension

Even though everyone feels pain differently, our bodies all react in the same way.

- There is more tension in your muscles.
- More tension limits your movement.
- When your movement is limited, you are less likely to hurt your body more. This gives your body a chance to heal.

Having pain and muscle tension after you have healed is not helpful.

- More muscle tension can add to your pain, which can cause more tension.
- You can get caught in a cycle of pain and muscle tension.

## **How can I lower my muscle tension?**

- The goal is to break the cycle of pain and muscle tension, and create a cycle of relaxation and pain management. Learning how to relax your muscles can make it easier to move, and lower your pain.
- **You can use relaxation to help manage your pain through deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and imagery.**

## Deep breathing

- **Shallow breathing** (breathing in the upper chest) is more common than deep breathing. This may be because of environmental stresses (like temperature, pollution, noise) or emotional stresses (like anxiety). With shallow breathing you can only take in a small amount of air with each breath, so you have to breathe faster. This makes you work harder, and can make you more tired and create stress in the body.
- **Deep breathing** fills your lungs with more air and oxygen. Since you breathe slower and take fewer breaths, you don't have to work as hard.
- Deep breathing can help to:
  - › relax your muscles
  - › lower your blood pressure and heart rate
  - › lower stress and anxiety
  - › quiet your mind
  - › increase your energy

## How can deep breathing help my pain?

- People with chronic pain often hold their breath when they move. This can lead to more muscle tension and more pain. Over time, you may start to hold your breath whenever you move, even when you are not in pain.

- Remind yourself to breathe while you move to help lessen muscle tension and pain.

### **How to do deep breathing:**

- You must practice using deep breathing to lessen muscle tension and pain. Set aside time each day to practice. You can do this for 30 seconds, a minute, 10 breaths, or whatever you choose.
- Practise deep breathing:
  - › before bed — it may help you to fall asleep.
  - › between tasks — it can help to lessen pain and muscle tension during movement.
- As you practice deep breathing regularly, it will become more natural. **Over time, it will become a habit.**
- Deep breathing is a great way to lower stress.
  - › When you breathe deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax.
  - › Breathing exercises are easy to learn.
  - › You can do breathing exercises whenever you want.
  - › You don't need any special tools or equipment.

## **Deep breathing exercise**

Try this exercise anytime you need to relax or relieve stress:

1. Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position.
2. Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs, and the other hand on your chest.
3. Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move as much.
4. Breathe out. Feel the hand on your belly go in. Keep feeling the hand on your belly as you let all of the air out.
5. Do this 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.
6. Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

## **Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)**

- Chronic pain causes an increase in muscle tension. Over time, you become less aware of this tension and are less likely to do things to help it.
- Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) teaches you to:
  - › focus your attention on different muscle groups in your body.

- › become more aware of how much tension there is in your muscles.
- › lower the tension in different areas of your body.

### **How to do PMR:**

- Start with one muscle group, lower the tension there, then move to a different muscle group. Repeat the process to relax the major muscle groups throughout your body. As one muscle group relaxes, it helps other muscle groups relax.
- There are different ways to do PMR: you can start in different areas of the body or focus on a different number of muscle groups.

### **To relax each muscle group:**

1. Focus your attention on a muscle group.
  - › Take a moment to become aware of how much tension is in the muscle and what that tension feels like.
2. Make a small movement to slightly increase the tension in the muscle.
  - › Notice what the muscle feels like as it gets more tense.

- › **Note:** You only need to make a slight movement to create a small increase in muscle tension. You only need enough tension to feel the difference between a tense muscle and a relaxed muscle. If you do not feel comfortable moving, you can just picture yourself moving. This will create a very small increase in muscle tension, which is all you need.)
- 3. Let go of the tension and let the muscle relax.
  - › Notice what the muscle feels like when it is relaxed.
  - › Notice the different feelings of when the muscle is tense and when it is relaxed.
- When you first learn PMR, it may help to use a guided exercise. This will help you to remember the different muscle groups and pace your practice. Try searching “progressive muscle relaxation exercise” on YouTube or the Internet.
- After you have practiced PMR for a while and are familiar with it, you may choose to skip step 2 and go directly to step 3.
- As you get more familiar with PMR, you can try doing it on your own. Like deep breathing, you must practice regularly to learn PMR. Try to practice a little bit, a few times during the day to make it part of your routine. With more practice, you will feel more confident about using PMR when you need it.

## Imagery

- You use your imagination every time you see something in your mind's eye, hear something in your head, or imagine the feeling of something, without it actually being there.
  - › For example, imagine that you are stuck in traffic, trying to get home for a special supper. How do you feel as you imagine the cars around you, hear the horns blaring from other frustrated drivers, smell the exhaust from surrounding vehicles, feel your hands tightening on the steering wheel, taste the sip of cold coffee you just had, and then see the low gas light go on?
  - › You will probably have a very different reaction than if you were to imagine yourself relaxing in a comfortable chair on your deck, feeling the cool breeze, tasting your favourite drink, watching your children play joyfully, and hearing the sizzle of your favourite food on the BBQ while noticing the delicious smell as it cooks.



## How to use imagery:

1. Imagery works best if you start in a relaxed state and will not be disturbed. You may wish to:
  - › loosen your clothing.
  - › take off your shoes and glasses.
  - › get in a comfortable, supported position.
  - › ask others to leave you alone for a certain amount of time.
  - › close your eyes.
  - › practice deep breathing.
  - › include **all** of your senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.
2. Add as much detail as you can. For example, while it is great to imagine a summer day with a clear, solid blue sky, it would be more helpful to imagine the same sky with different shades of blue, a few clouds, and a couple of birds flying overhead.
3. Imagine yourself taking part as actively as possible. By imagining yourself moving around or picking up objects, you deepen your experience. Your brain is more likely to think that you are actually in that relaxing environment and you are more likely to experience deeper relaxation.

- Everyone is different. For some people, imagining themselves relaxing on a beach alone will work, while others will prefer to be in the middle of a neighbourhood block party. When you first practice imagery, it may help to use a guided exercise. Try searching “imagery exercise” on YouTube.
- Imagery works best if you practice it regularly. Experiment with it to see what you like. If you find a relaxing image that you really like, you can use it again and again, until it is so familiar that it feels like you are watching a movie.

## **How can I lower my pain and tension?**

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