



Patient & Family Guide
2020

Understanding Pain

Pain Self-Management Program

Aussi disponible en français :
Comprendre la douleur (FF85-2150)



www.nshealth.ca

Understanding Pain

What is pain?

Experiencing some pain in life is normal. The feeling of pain is personal and real. Everyone has felt pain at some time in their life. We may use words like burning, sharp, dull, or aching to describe pain. These words describe the physical feelings of pain. But pain affects other parts of our lives too. It affects how we feel, what we do, and how we see ourselves.

To understand pain, we have to understand how the nervous system works.

Understanding short-term pain

Pain is part of an alarm system your brain uses to help keep you safe. When you slam your thumb in a car door, an electrical impulse travels along nerves to your brain. These impulses are **your body's way of warning the brain of possible danger.** The brain decodes the message and decides if there is a threat.

If your brain decides there is a threat, you will feel pain. This helps you to do things differently like:

- › protect your body.
- › rest your injured body part.
- › do less activities.

These actions let the injury heal. As your injury heals, you will have less pain. Healing time depends on the type of injury. Most healing happens within the first 6 weeks. Healing is usually finished by 3 to 6 months.

Understanding long-term pain

- Usually, pain lessens as an injury heals, and goes away completely when healing is done. However, some people feel pain long after an injury has healed.
- In this case, pain is no longer a signal telling you that your body is injured. Pain that stays long after an injury has healed is related to a change in how sensitive your nervous system alarms are. **The pain you feel does not mean harm.**
- The body can only send signals to the brain. **It is the brain that decides if there is a threat and if you will feel pain.**

- **There are many factors that can affect long-term pain. Your pain depends on how your brain interprets your situation.** The pain you feel is affected by:
 - › things you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch.
 - › things you say, think, and believe.
 - › things you do, places you go, and people in your life.
 - › things happening in your body.
- If your brain thinks there is a threat, **it may try to protect the body by causing:**
 - › Pain
 - › Muscle tension
 - › Muscle weakness
 - › Fatigue (tiredness)
 - › Dizziness
 - › Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach)
 - › Faster breathing and heart rate
 - › A change in thoughts and emotions
 - › And more
- The treatments for short-term and long-term pain are different. Short-term pain warns us that something is wrong with our body. The goal of treatment is to rest, do less activities, and find the injury.

- Long-term pain is not a symptom of injury. It is caused by a change in how sensitive your nervous system alarms are. The goal of treatment is to manage your pain and lower this sensitivity. When you live with long-term pain, **understanding the things that affect your pain can help you lessen it.**

What can affect long-term pain?

- To better understand long-term pain, it helps to know all of the things that can affect how you experience it. The messages sent from your body tissues to your brain can be changed by the messages sent from your brain. Your brain may cause more or less pain.
- The more your brain sees these things as a threat, the more pain you will feel and the more sensitive your alarm system will become. You may get caught in a cycle of pain and more nervous system sensitivity. This is called the cycle of sensitization. **Some sensitization goes away over time and some takes longer to go away.**
- **The good news is that you can change your nervous system.** You can help your brain change how you experience pain by knowing what makes it worse and what makes it better.

- Things that may make your pain worse include:
 - › Stress
 - › Keeping negative feelings inside
 - › Doing too much
 - › Focusing on your pain
 - › Not being active
- Things that may make your pain better include:
 - › Activity pacing — For more info, see the *Pain and Pacing Daily Activities* pamphlet found here: <https://libcat.nshealth.ca>
 - › Relaxation exercises
 - › Being kind to yourself
 - › Exercise
 - › Sleep
- Having many tools and strategies (including physical, emotional, and mental) that you can use regularly can help you change how you experience pain and how sensitive your nervous system alarms are.

What are your questions?

Please ask. We are here to help you.

Tool / Strategy	How does it help my pain?

Examples of tools: Magic Bag[®], heating pad, ice pack, TENS machine, seat cushions, sleep pillows (like a body pillow, water pillow, memory foam pillow), walking poles, back brace, etc.

Examples of strategies: activity pacing, sleep routine, relaxation strategies (like imagery, progressive muscle relaxation), etc.

