

Chronic Pain

questions to ask your health care providers
to help you receive high-quality care





What is chronic pain?

When pain from an injury or illness lasts longer than three months, it is considered chronic. This type of pain is common, affecting about one in five Canadians. It often feels like joint pain, back pain, or nerve pain following an injury or with chronic conditions like arthritis or diabetes. Sometimes, there is no known cause.

Chronic pain can be stressful, but it's possible to manage your pain so you can live well. It also may take time to find the right combination of treatments, but your health care providers can help you keep doing the things that are important to you, such as hobbies, work, housekeeping, or exercise.

Use the topics outlined here to guide your conversations with your health care providers as you work together on the best treatment plan for you:

- Telling your chronic pain story
- Setting goals
- Staying active
- Your well-being
- Medications

Learning about chronic pain and making a plan for your care—with help from your health care providers—can help you manage the pain and improve your quality of life. This guide is designed to support you along the way.



Write it down

It may help you to write down your experience with the pain and the challenges it presents day to day. Having written details on hand when you talk with your health care providers will help you give a more complete description of your experience.

You can use this guide each time you visit and review your care plan with your health care providers.



Learn more

There's a lot of information out there about chronic pain, but it can be challenging to know what's reliable. The patients, caregivers, and clinicians we spoke with told us these are resources and programs they find useful:

- [Online Chronic Disease Self-Management Program](#)
- [Ontario Chronic Pain Clinics](#)

For information on chronic pain in children and youth:

- [AboutKidsHealth Pain](#)
- [PainBytes](#)



Telling your chronic pain story

Everyone describes their pain—how it feels and how it affects their lives—a little differently. Think about the details you would use to explain the pain, and make notes to share with your health care providers. Reviewing this information can lead to better discussions and a more focused care plan.

Some things you might want to share with your health care providers:

- What your pain feels like
- Where it's located
- What may have caused it
- Whether you can carry on with your usual activities
- Things that lessen your pain
- Any other health issues or concerns
- Whether your pain affects your mood
- Whether the pain affects other aspects of your life, such as sleep, work, or relationships
- Any barriers (physical, financial, emotional) you face when seeking help to manage your pain

[My health care providers] let me explain things in my own terms ...

They simply accepted what I said the way I said it. It helped me feel like I was being taken seriously, and I really valued that.

PERSON WITH CHRONIC PAIN



Setting goals

Share your priorities and goals with your health care providers. The more they know, the better they can help build the right care plan with you. Setting goals for managing your pain and improving your quality of life will also keep you motivated, let you track your progress, and help you feel more in control, even if the pain is still there.

Share with your health care providers:

- The activities that are most important to you
- Any goals you have in mind—these could include things like returning to work or school, caring for loved ones, taking a walk around the block, taking a shower safely, or having a good night's sleep
- Changes you can make at home, school, or work
- What you can do to get through a pain flare-up (a short-term increase in pain)



Ask about: staying active

You might avoid some of your usual activities because you're worried that they will make the pain worse. But evidence shows that staying active is very important for people with chronic pain. In fact, resting too much or avoiding exercise can worsen your pain.

Ask your health care providers:

- What are some activities I can try?
- How much exercise should I aim to do?



Did you know?

In addition to your regular daily activities, planned exercise can reduce your pain and help keep you moving. A small amount of exercise is better than none, and you can increase the amount you do slowly over time. Activities such as swimming, yoga, walking, and stretching can be good choices for people with chronic pain. Ask your health care provider which kind of exercise might be good for you.



Ask about: your well-being

Chronic pain doesn't just affect your body—it takes an emotional toll, too. Fear, stress, and anger are common. One recommended way to manage chronic pain is to try things that help both your body and your mind.

Let your health care providers know how you're feeling. They can help connect you with the right supports and care providers who specialize in treating chronic pain.

Ask your health care providers:

- What services or programs are available to help me manage my pain?*
- Is individual or group counselling an option for me?*
- Are there any support groups in my community where I can meet other people with chronic pain?
- What relaxation or mindfulness techniques can I try?
- Are other community resources available, such as spiritual supports or community supports for income, language, or disability?



For your employer

Talking to your employer about your chronic pain can also help you manage while you're at work. Setting goals and finding out how an employer can help will round out your overall support.

It's very validating for me to feel like I have a community and that someone else has been through things that I have.

PERSON WITH CHRONIC PAIN

*If cost is a concern, ask your health care providers about low- or no-cost options.



Ask about: medications

Different medications can treat chronic pain, and your doctor or nurse practitioner may prescribe medication that can be used along with other non-drug treatments.

Ask your doctor or nurse practitioner:

- Are there medications for chronic pain that might be right for me?
- What should I expect the medication to do for me?
- Are there any side effects to this medication?
- Is this medication safe to take with other medications I am already taking?
- How much will the medication cost?
- How often should I review my medications with a pharmacist or doctor?



Did you know?

There are different kinds of medication for chronic pain, and one or more might be right for you.

Opioid medications—such as codeine, fentanyl, hydromorphone, morphine, oxycodone, and tramadol—can be very effective for acute pain such as a broken bone, and they are sometimes prescribed for chronic pain.

If you and your health care provider are considering opioids for your chronic pain, you should discuss the possible benefits, side effects, and harms, including the risk of addiction and overdose.

For more information on opioids, please read our patient guide on [Opioid Prescribing for Chronic Pain](#).



A note to caregivers

If you're helping to care for someone with chronic pain, this guide is for you too. Chronic pain can change day to day, month to month. Sometimes the person may be very involved in their own care; at other times, they may rely more on you. So, it may be helpful to understand their goals for managing their pain and improving their quality of life, and for you to know who their health care providers are.

Your own well-being is also important. Here are some things to consider:

- How are you feeling?
- What are your goals and needs?
- Do you have your own primary care provider (family doctor, nurse practitioner)?
- Are you regularly looking after your own health needs?
- Support/peer groups can be important for caregivers—are there any that are available to you?
- Do you have help to give you a break from caregiving if you need it?



For your reference: The quality standard in brief

Health Quality Ontario is committed to helping patients, health care providers, and organizations improve the quality of health care in Ontario.

We know that not everyone across the province receives the right care, every time. So, to help address gaps in care, we produce quality standards that outline what quality care looks like for specific conditions and situations, such as chronic pain. Quality standards are based on current best evidence and input from patients, caregivers, and health care providers.

This patient guide accompanies the quality standard on chronic pain.

If you're interested in the quality standard, below is a summary. To read more, [download it here](#).

Comprehensive Assessment

For clinicians: People with chronic pain receive a comprehensive assessment that includes consideration of functional status and the social determinants of health.

What this means for you

Your health care professional should ask you about your pain, your health, your ability to sleep and rest, your ability to function at work or school and at home, and any other issues that may be affecting your health.

Setting Goals for Pain Management and Function

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are encouraged to set goals for pain management and improved function. They regularly evaluate these goals with their health care professionals.

What this means for you

Have conversations with your health care professionals to set goals for managing your pain and improving your quality of life. Discuss goals that matter to you, including reducing your pain and improving your ability to function at work, at school, or at home.

Supported Self-Management and Education

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are offered education and are encouraged and supported to access self-management resources or programs as part of a long-term management strategy.

What this means for you

You and your family should be offered education on chronic pain and information on self-management programs for chronic pain in your community. Self-management groups and programs can connect you with other people with chronic pain and help you develop goal-setting and coping skills.

Physical Activity

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are encouraged and supported to engage in regular physical activity.

What this means for you

Daily physical activity can reduce pain and improve function. Your health care professional can help you decide what activities might work best for you.

Physically Based Interventions

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are encouraged and supported to engage in physically based interventions.

What this means for you

Manual therapies can reduce pain in the short term. Talk with your health care professional to determine what physically based interventions might benefit you based on your goals and condition.

Therapeutic Exercise

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are encouraged and supported to engage in therapeutic exercise.

What this means for you

Exercise can reduce your pain and improve your mood. Talk with your health care professional about exercises that might help you based on your goals and condition.

Pharmacotherapy

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are offered non-opioid pharmacotherapies as first-line treatment for chronic pain. Medications are regularly reviewed for effectiveness in meeting goals for pain management and improved function.

What this means for you

Talk with your health care provider to determine if medications may benefit you, based on your goals and condition. Regularly discuss your medications with your health care professional. Let them know whether your medications are improving your pain and function, or if you are having any side effects.

Psychologically Based Interventions

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are offered psychological assessment and appropriate psychologically based interventions.

What this means for you

Your family doctor or nurse practitioner should ask you about your mood and mental health. They should discuss approaches to coping with chronic pain and improving your quality of life that include psychological services such as mindfulness, counselling, or therapy. You should be offered resources available in your community that are appropriate for you.

Psychosocial Supports

For clinicians: People with chronic pain, their families, and their caregivers are offered psychosocial supports that consider their emotional, social, cultural, cognitive, accessibility, or spiritual needs. Psychosocial supports may include traditional knowledge, medicines, and healing practices for chronic pain, where appropriate.

What this means for you

Your health care professional should ask you, your family, and your caregivers about your mental, emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual well-being. These needs should be discussed and addressed as part of your care for chronic pain and according to your wishes, values, and goals for pain management and function.

Interventional Management of Chronic Pain

For clinicians: People with chronic pain are offered interventional management, when clinically indicated, in combination with other strategies and interventions as part of an interprofessional approach to chronic pain management.

What this means for you

You may be offered interventional management (injections or an implanted device) for your chronic pain, depending on the type of pain you have. Discuss these techniques with your doctor and talk about how effective they might be and the potential risks involved.

Access and Referral to an Interprofessional Chronic Pain Program

For clinicians: People whose quality of life is significantly impacted by their chronic pain are referred by their primary care provider to an interprofessional pain program. They are seen for a first appointment within 3 months of referral.

What this means for you

If your quality of life is significantly impacted by your chronic pain, you may be referred to a pain program where you can get treatment from different types of health care providers who have expertise with pain. You should receive a first appointment within 3 months of referral.

Transitions and Coordination of Care

For clinicians: People with chronic pain receive timely and collaborative care during and after health care transitions.

What this means for you

When you change care settings or health care providers, your care team should work with you to make sure that important information about your care plan, your goals for pain management and function, and your medications travels with you.

What's next?

Remember, everybody is different.

The support you need and the care plan you develop with your health care providers will be unique to you.

This conversation guide is meant as only a starting point.

You may have other topics you want to cover with your health care providers. It's important to speak to them about any other questions or concerns.

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at qualitystandards@hqontario.ca or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on chronic pain, read the quality standard at: hqontario.ca/qualitystandards