Sheffield Persistent Pain

NHS Sheffield

Persistent Pain

Patient Information Leaflet

www.sheffieldpersistentpain.com

What is Persistent Pain?

Persistent pain (sometimes called chronic or long-term) is described as '*pain that continues for three months or more and may not respond to standard medical treatment*'.

It is quite common, affecting around one in seven of us, and can be caused by a longstanding condition, like arthritis, or as a result of a specific problem. Persistent pain can also develop gradually, sometimes for no obvious reason, and may even come on some time after an activity or injury.

Persistent pain can be felt in a specific part of the body such as back, shoulder or leg(s), or throughout the body. The pain may be continuous or vary in its level – sometimes flaring up or getting worse very quickly while at other times being easier to manage.

What is going on when people have persistent pain?

Persistent pain is different to short acting 'acute' pain and often doesn't respond to usual treatments.

This is because the problem is with the pain system itself, rather than being related to a specific problem in the body.

Think of the pain system as a computer – with microchips and processors (like our brain and spinal cord), and wires (our nerves). If parts of the computer go wrong – a faulty chip or crossed wire - it stops working properly. In the pain system, this means we experience persistent pain when there is no real reason for it.

Why do people develop persistent pain?

There is still a lot that is not understood about why pain can continue after injuries heal, or why it can be present without any physical problem.

Studies suggest some people are born with genes that make them more vulnerable - in other words some are unlucky and more prone to developing problems in their pain systems.

"I was constantly looking for a cure, but soon found out that I had to learn to live with it. I do just that now with the help of my GP and Practice Nurse." ***T.F***

How does persistent pain make people feel?

Living with persistent pain can be stressful and can affect people in lots of different ways. Managing at home, work duties and dealing with friends and family can be difficult.

People often feel they have no control over the pain and are unable to cope with it.

Experiencing pain can lead to feelings of anxiety or fear about what might be causing the pain and what the future might hold. This is usual for many people, especially where there is no obvious cause.

Feeling pain can also make you feel tense, especially if you expect the pain to come back or get worse. You may feel easily angered and hostile towards people that don't understand your situation or how your pain affects you. Some people even feel anger towards the pain itself.

When things aren't going so well, it can lead to troubling thoughts. You may feel hopeless and very down about feeling this pain, which can result in depression.

The pain itself or worrying about it may cause difficulties with sleeping. Being tired and having a sleepless night can make you feel more upset and bad tempered.

But it's not all bad news and there are many things you can do to live a full life, despite your pain.

"I read in a booklet about how people with pain become 'can't do' people – that was me. Since then, with the help of my Practice Nurse, I have become a can-do person again." S.B

What can you do about persistent pain?

At the moment we don't have a cure for persistent pain, and some patients may have to accept that this is a condition they have to live with long-term.

The good news is you can learn skills that can help you to better manage your condition.

Some become so good at managing their pain that it fades completely into the background for much of the time.

Everyone is different so the right plan will vary from person to person.

Self-managing persistent pain can involve learning how to do things differently and the right treatments and medicines, as well as learning to think and react differently to the pain, and life events in general.

There are lots of sources of help - www.sheffieldpersistentpain.com is a good place to start. Linking up with your GP, pain management specialists and/or others who have learned good pain management skills can be really helpful.