

**Physiotherapy works ✓**

# Chronic pain

**Physiotherapy maximises activity, improves quality of life and promotes self-management for people with chronic pain.**

## What is chronic pain?

Chronic, persistent or long-term pain is pain that continues all the time or on and off for more than 3 months.<sup>(1)</sup> Pain may be caused by a condition, injury or infection or have no identified cause. It can affect a specific body area (e.g. Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, low back pain (LBP), pelvic pain) or be widespread (e.g. fibromyalgia). Chronic pain is a complex condition which contributes to disability, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, poor quality of life, and healthcare costs.<sup>(2)</sup> Physiotherapists see people with chronic pain individually, in groups or as part of a specialist team in a pain management clinic, working collaboratively to achieve healthy levels of activity and promote self-management.<sup>(3)</sup> Specialist physiotherapists identify reasons for lack of progress such as erroneous beliefs about or fear of movement and exercise<sup>(4)</sup> or unhelpful patterns of over- and under-activity.

A combined physical and psychological programme using a cognitive behavioural approach preferably in a group context is recommended for people with chronic low back pain or sciatica.<sup>(5)</sup>

People with complex pain and pain-associated disability may require access to a multidisciplinary or multispecialty Pain Management Centre.<sup>(6)</sup> GP referral to services for advice and exercise ►►

**25%**  
of people with  
chronic pain lose  
their jobs<sup>(11)</sup>



improves outcomes and is cost-effective. Using a risk-stratification tool (such as StarTBack)<sup>(7)</sup> and providing risk-matched treatment, improves the condition, shortens time off work, reduces sickness certification and healthcare costs. Evidence suggests physical activity and exercise is an intervention with few adverse events that may improve pain severity, physical function, and quality of life (QoL).<sup>(2)</sup> Physiotherapy supports and enables people with chronic pain to remain in or return to work. Mindfulness<sup>(8)</sup> and acceptance & commitment therapy (ACT)<sup>(9)</sup> have been shown to be as effective as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and are often used. Physiotherapists facilitate patients to learn self-management skills and access resources from an early stage of a pain condition through to use as part of a long term management strategy.<sup>(3)</sup> Many physiotherapists use prescribing skills to optimise medication use.<sup>(10)</sup>

## Conclusion

Chronic pain impacts significantly upon physical, emotional and social wellbeing.<sup>(1)</sup> Group and individual physiotherapy can safely and cost-effectively support and guide people with long term pain to enable the best possible quality of life.

## Significant impact

- Chronic Pain affects between **one third** and **one half** of the UK population<sup>(15)</sup>
- In England **31%** men and **37%** women report suffering from chronic pain<sup>(1)</sup>
- Chronic pain is one of the **most prominent** causes of disability worldwide.<sup>(16)</sup>

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## Cost of chronic pain



- Chronic Pain is the second most common reason for claiming incapacity benefit, costing **£3.8 billion** annually<sup>(11)</sup>
- **£584 million** a year is spent on prescriptions for pain<sup>(12)</sup>
- Annual healthcare costs for patients with chronic LBP are double those of matched controls (**£1,074 vs. £516**).<sup>(13)</sup>

## Case study

The Best multi-centre randomised controlled trial, involving 56 general practices across seven English regions, compared active management (AM) of patients with sub-acute or chronic LBP against AM plus CBT. Outcomes measured included physical and mental QoL, fear avoidance beliefs and pain self-efficacy. Cost utility was evaluated using NHS costs. AM plus CBT had higher per-person costs (£178) and higher QoL. AM is highly cost-effective at currently accepted thresholds: Cost per quality-adjusted lifeyears (QALY) is about half that of competing LBP interventions.<sup>(14)</sup>

## Further information CSP Enquiries Team

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Physiotherapy Pain Association



[painconcern.org.uk](http://painconcern.org.uk)

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