

## Too Many People Ignore Chronic Pain: Pain Medication, Physical Therapy, Better Coping Skills All Help Ease Pain

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May 6, 2004 -- The majority of chronic pain sufferers put off seeing a doctor. Many are in denial about their constant pain. They shrink their lives to fit their condition, a new survey shows.

The nationwide random survey, released today by the American Chronic Pain Association, provides a snapshot of how chronic pain affects quality of life. The survey results are based on telephone interviews with 800 people who have chronic pain.

### **Pain Sets In Early for Some**

Anyone can develop chronic pain -- but it commonly occurs in older adults or others with health conditions, such as diabetes, arthritis, or back problems. However, persistent pain is not a normal part of aging. And even people in their 20s and 30s develop chronic pain.

Treatment typically involves prescription painkillers or other medication, physical therapy, exercise, and therapy to develop better coping skills. Alternative treatments -- like acupuncture and yoga -- can also help. While chronic pain cannot be cured, it can be managed well enough to significantly improve the quality of your life. "Pain really can affect your quality of life -- emotionally, physically, how we deal with stress, how active we are, says Penney Cowan, executive director of the American Chronic Pain Association." And, unfortunately, many people don't get treatment until they are practically nonfunctional." At age 25, Cowan felt the first symptoms of fibromyalgia -- chronic, widespread muscle pain -- and ignored it for two years until it nearly incapacitated her. In fact, chronic pain often begins much earlier than most people realize. And among people between ages 18 and 34 with chronic pain, 82% of them are affected emotionally by their chronic pain, the survey showed. "We're seeing a lot of younger people experiencing pain, more than you would expect," Cowan tells WebMD. "I think it's the more active lifestyle we're leading, a lot more sports-related injuries. We need to educate people on preventing pain and on getting adequate treatment immediately to hopefully avoid long-term pain."

### **Quality of Life Seriously Affected**

Careers and personal lives are affected by the pain, says Cowan. "Employers, people in general don't realize how debilitating it can be. Pain is invisible. People can't see that anything hurts. If they see you acting OK, they think you're good to go for everything. That might not be true."

Among the survey results:

- Women are more likely to be affected emotionally by their pain than men.
- 70% of pain sufferers feel greater stress and 55% feel less motivation as a result of their pain.
- Nearly three in ten men have flagging libido due to chronic pain.
- 41% of workers with chronic pain say their pain adversely affects their ability to put in a full day's work.
- Three in ten say it affects their ability to get to work.
- One in six employed people living with chronic pain say it has adversely affected their career advancement opportunities.

### **Treatment Works**

Treatment *does* offer relief, says Cowan. "We have to learn to live with the pain, manage it, apply better coping skills, pace ourselves, and know our abilities. The big message is, realize that there are things you may not be able to do. But don't dwell on that, focus on what you *can* do."

Her survey showed the positive effects of getting treatment:

- 81% of people seeing a doctor for pain report being very satisfied.
- 86% of people taking prescription pain medication are also using alternatives, like physical therapy, massage, and meditation.

However:

- 56% of those taking pain medications worry about side effects.
- 52% report drowsiness and 41% say they have had nausea from pain medications.

"Pain is not simple," says Cowan. "Finding the right doctor can be difficult. Doctors and nurses are not really trained in pain management. They're trained in diagnosis and treatment of disease, but not in managing pain. And because it's complex, treating pain takes a team approach, with the patient playing an active role."

Start with your primary care doctor, she advises. "You have to start at the beginning, rule out certain causes. You may have to see a few specialists. Even then, there aren't always clear answers." The bottom line: If you have pain, taking an active role will help bring relief, Cowan says. "When you do that, you *can* start living again."

*SOURCES: Penney Cowan, executive director, American Chronic Pain Association. American Chronic Pain Association. WebMD Medical Reference from Healthwise: "Chronic Pain."*

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