

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 continuing beyond 3 months or after healing is complete.⁽¹⁾ Affecting adults and children, it may arise from tissue damage or inflammation 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 with physical, social and psychological components, which can lead to disability, loss of independence and poor quality of life (QoL).⁽²⁾

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy in hospitals, clinics and the community aims to achieve healthy levels of activity and self-management for people with chronic pain.⁽³⁾

Clinical and cost-effectiveness evidence supports using a cognitive behavioural approach addressing both physical limitations and people's beliefs about, and understanding of, their condition.⁽⁴⁾ People with multiple health issues or whose pain is causing significant physical, psychological or social problems may require management by a

multidisciplinary pain service.

Specialist physiotherapists identify reasons for lack of progress in rehabilitation, such as fear avoidance of movement or unhelpful patterns of over- and under-activity.



25%
of people with
chronic pain lose
their jobs⁽¹⁵⁾



GP referral to services for advice and exercise improves outcomes and is cost-effective.⁽⁵⁾ Using a risk-stratification tool and providing risk-matched treatment improves the condition, shortens time off work, reduces sickness certification and healthcare costs.⁽⁶⁾

Manual therapy or acupuncture may produce short term benefit⁽⁷⁾, but evidence supports the use of active treatments such as therapeutic exercise.⁽⁵⁾ Multidisciplinary pain management programmes (PMP)⁽⁸⁾ including physiotherapy⁽⁹⁾ are an effective intervention for people with chronic pain^(3,8) and cost-saving compared to physiotherapy alone.⁽¹⁰⁾ Physiotherapy supports and enables people with chronic pain to remain in or return to work.⁽³⁾ Mindfulness⁽¹¹⁾ and acceptance & commitment therapy (ACT) have been shown to be as effective as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and are used in some centres.⁽¹²⁾ Physiotherapists signpost people to online and community resources to support ongoing self-management.⁽³⁾ Increasingly physiotherapists use prescribing skills to optimise medication use.⁽¹³⁾

Conclusion

Chronic pain can impact significantly upon physical, emotional and social wellbeing. Physiotherapy utilising a broad scope of practice can safely and cost-effectively support and guide people with long term pain towards the best possible quality of life.

Significant impact

- Chronic back pain affects **1.6 million** adults per year⁽¹⁵⁾
- **7.8 million** people in the UK live with chronic pain⁽¹⁵⁾
- Chronic pain accounts for **4.6 million** GP appointments per year.⁽¹⁶⁾



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Cost of chronic pain



- Pain is the second most common reason for claiming incapacity benefit, costing **£3.8 billion** annually⁽¹⁷⁾
- **£584 million** a year is spent on prescriptions for pain⁽¹⁵⁾
- Annual healthcare costs for patients with chronic LBP are double those of matched controls (**£1,074 vs. £516**).⁽¹⁸⁾

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 life-years (QALY) is about half that of competing LBP interventions.⁽¹⁴⁾

Further information

CSP Enquiry Handling Unit

Tel: **0207 306 6666**
Email: enquiries@csp.org.uk
Web: www.csp.org.uk



Physiotherapy Pain Association

www.painresearch.org.uk