

Medications for Chronic Pain

Chronic pain, pain that lasts 3 months or longer can come from an injury or an illness, like cancer or arthritis.

"I'm just getting through til tomorrow."-John, Patient

Pain is part of daily life for John Zemler. Old Army injuries and a recent fall are some of the problem. But John, a university professor, also suffers from fibromyalgia, a disorder that causes chronic pain in his muscles and bones and often results in sleep, memory and mood issues.

"I haven't been able to do any research for quite a while because my mind is not there. I have never actually recovered the intellectual level that I used to be at. I have recovered the ability to do art."-John, Patient

Chronic pain sufferers and their healthcare providers work together to come up with a treatment plan. The goal is to limit the pain, so the person can do their day-to-day activities. One part of that treatment plan might include pain medications.

"The treatment that I'm on is I'm on a shot for the rheumatoid arthritis."-Sue, Patient

Sue Schneeberg's arthritis is so painful when it flares up that it's all she can do to get out of bed. By controlling her arthritis with a shot, or injection, she seems to get some relief.

"I do it once every two weeks and then I just started a new drug. Can't remember the name of it but it's a, it's a low dose chemo drug that I take once a week and then I also take folic acid, the vitamin, every day."-Sue, Patient

Depending on what's causing your pain, the type of medication your doctor recommends can vary and, like Sue, it may take some trial-and-error to find the best combination for you. For some, NSAIDs such as aspirin, naproxen or ibuprofen can work, but they can cause stomach or kidney problems. Acetaminophen, such as Tylenol, might be easier on your stomach, but it can cause liver problems if taken over a long period of time and at higher than recommended doses. Anti-depression medication can help with the mood swings from dealing with chronic pain.

And then there are opioid pain relievers, such as codeine, morphine or oxycodone. Only available by prescription, they can be very effective at pain relief, but they may cause side effects and can also be addictive, so long-term use must be carefully monitored by your doctor. John Zemler was on medically-supervised opioid therapy for his chronic pain for 10 years. It allowed him to continue working.

"You're never going to be pain free. But it can move it from an abscess tooth just down to a toothache and then you learn how to operate with a toothache."-John, Patient

Medications for Chronic Pain

"Maybe it's reducing your pain but are you paying too big of a price for that with regard to sedation and functionality?"-Dr. Michael Miller, Addiction Medicine Physician

That's exactly what happened with John. The benefits of the opioid pain relief no longer outweighed the downsides.

"I knew that my mind was fuddled more than it used to be. A couple months after I finally cleared off of the OxyContin, I was drawing again."-John, Patient

If you are prescribed opioids for chronic pain management, experts advise you to lock them up, to prevent an accidental overdose by anyone who lives with you, especially children.

"Having large supplies of opioids in the home is no more, safe than having large supplies of toxic chemicals and cleaners in the house that can be misused."- Dr. Michael Miller, Addiction Medicine Physician

And if you find you have opioids you no longer need, they need to be disposed of safely. Check the internet for medication disposal sites in your area. Whether it's opioids or any other medication that you take to treat chronic pain, make sure you understand the risks and the benefits. Work with your medical team to find the best treatment plan to provide you with relief so you can live life the way you want to.