

Understanding Your Pain

Dealing with pain can be the hardest part of having arthritis or a related condition, but you can learn to manage it and its impact on your life. The first step is knowing which type of arthritis or condition you have, because that will help determine your treatment. Before learning different management techniques, however, it's important to understand some concepts about pain.

Not All Pain is Alike

Just as there are different types of arthritis, there are also different types of pain. Even your own pain may vary from day to day.

Each person needs a [pain management plan](#). What works for one person may not work for someone else. You may need to try several different treatments before you find the one that works for you.

The Purpose of Pain

Pain is your body's alarm system that tells you something is wrong. When your body is injured, nerves in the affected area release chemical signals. Other nerves send these signals to your brain, where they are recognized as pain.

Pain often tells you that you need to act. For example, if you touch a hot stove, pain signals from your brain make you pull your hand away. This type of pain helps protect you.

Long-lasting pain, like the kind that accompanies arthritis or [fibromyalgia](#), is different. While it tells you that something is wrong, it often isn't as easy to relieve. Managing this type of pain is essential to enhance your quality of life and sense of well-being.

Causes of Pain

Arthritis pain is caused by several factors, such as:

- **Inflammation**, the process that causes the redness and swelling in your joints;
- **Damage to joint tissues**, which results from the disease process or from stress, injury or pressure on the joints;
- **Fatigue that results from the disease process**, which can make your pain seem worse and harder to handle;
- **Depression or stress**, which results from limited movement or no longer doing activities you enjoy. You can get caught in a cycle of pain, limited/lost abilities, stress and depression that makes managing pain and arthritis seem more difficult.

Different Reactions to Pain

People react differently to pain for several reasons. Physical factors include the sensitivity of your nervous system and the severity of your arthritis. Emotional and social factors include your fears and anxieties about pain, previous experiences with pain, energy level, attitude about your condition and the way people around you react to pain.

Many people with arthritis have found that by learning and practicing pain management skills, they can reduce their pain.

Pain Factors

What can make your pain feel worse?

- Increased disease activity
- Stress
- Overdoing physical activity
- Focusing on pain
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Depression

What can block pain signals?

- Positive attitude and pleasant thoughts
- Appropriate exercise
- Relaxation
- Medications
- Massage
- Distraction
- Topical pain relievers
- Humor
- Heat and cold treatments

How the Body Controls Pain

Pain signals travel through a system of nerves in your brain and spinal cord. At times, your body tries to stop these signals by creating chemicals that help block pain signals. These chemicals, called endorphins, are morphine-like painkilling substances that decrease the pain sensation.

Different factors cause the body to produce endorphins. One example is your own thoughts and emotions. For example, a father who is driving his children is hurt in a car accident. He is so worried about his children that he doesn't feel the pain of his own broken arm. The concern for his children has caused the natural release of endorphins, which block the pain signal and prevent him from noticing the pain.

The body also produces endorphins in response to external factors, such as medicine. Codeine is one example of a powerful pain-blocking medication. Other external pain control methods, such as heat and cold treatments, can stimulate the body to either release endorphins or block pain signals in other ways.