

FACT SHEET

PAIN

22 June 2021



ENDOMETRIOSIS AT A GLANCE

Endometriosis is a condition where tissue similar to the endometrium (the lining of the uterus) grows elsewhere in the body. This tissue responds to reproductive hormones where oestrogen stimulates patches forming superficial, lesions or endometrioma (ovarian cysts). Inflammation is generally present, and adhesions (scar tissue) can also form in response. Endometriosis within the muscle tissue of the uterus is known as adenomyosis, typically characterised by an enlarged uterus and heavy menstrual flow as well as pain at time of period.

Everyone experiences pain but each person experiences pain differently, which means there are various ways to feel and describe it. Treatment for pain depends on the type of pain, what has caused it and where it is.

Pain can last for a short period of time or it can be ongoing lasting days, weeks, months or years. Learning about different types of pain and what can be done to manage the pain can help reduce the impact on your life.

WHAT IS PAIN?

The International Association for the Study of Pain defines pain as “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage.”

Pain is a feeling that tells you something may be wrong in a part of your body. It's the result of a message from special nerves called nociceptors. When nociceptors find damaged tissue in your body, they send information about the damage along your spinal cord to your brain.

WHY DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE PAIN DIFFERENTLY?

Pain is not just a physical sensation, it is learnt through life experiences; how we think and feel about pain is shaped by how our parents talked about pain, and other attitudes and beliefs about pain we have picked up along the way. Pain is always influenced by attitudes, beliefs, personality and social factors, and can affect emotional and mental wellbeing.

Pain is also linked to the emotional centres in the brain, this means how you are feeling has an effect on your pain. If you feel angry, depressed, or anxious, your pain can seem worse. If you are feeling positive or happy, your pain can seem less, and you are able to cope better.

Although two people may have the same pain condition, their experience of living with pain can be vastly different due to their different life experiences, attitudes and beliefs.

TYPES OF PAIN

Acute Pain

Acute pain usually comes on suddenly often as a result of a known injury (cuts, burns, muscle strains, or bone fractures), illness (food poisoning, strep throat or appendicitis) or medical procedure (injection, dental work or surgery).

It tends to be sharp, rather than dull and usually goes away within a few days, weeks or months after the cause has been treated or resolved.

Acute pain can transition into chronic pain if it is untreated or poorly treated. This happens when neuroplastic changes occur within the nervous system, which make the body more sensitive to pain and can create sensations of pain even without external pain stimuli. For example, people can feel pain from breeze or clothes touching their skin.

The longer pain remains untreated, the greater the risk of the body becoming sensitised to pain, and the pain becoming chronic. Therefore timely and effective treatment of acute pain is essential to prevent transition to chronic pain.

Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than 3 months. It is also called persistent pain or long-term pain. Chronic pain is thought to occur when nociceptors (nerves) become over-sensitive and send warning messages to the brain.

Some people experience chronic pain following an injury, even after the initial injury has healed.

Chronic pain is complex and can be difficult to treat. It can be distressing and impact on emotional and physical wellbeing. Chronic pain can be shooting, burning, or aching and can lead to discomfort, soreness, tightness or stiffness. Having ongoing pain can be distressing and often leads to other symptoms such as:

- fatigue, which can cause impatience and a lack of motivation
- trouble sleeping, often because the pain keeps you awake during the night
- not being active and an increased need to rest
- a weakened immune system, leading to frequent infections or illness
- low mood and feelings such as hopelessness, fear, anxiety and stress
- disability, which may include not being able to go to work or school or perform other daily activities.

Chronic pain is often described as a cycle where your pain causes feelings of anxiety, low mood, fatigue and sleeplessness, which results in increased pain. The increased pain then causes you to have more low mood, tiredness and stress, so you can get caught in an endless cycle. The good news is that means there are a number of ways you can approach managing chronic pain to get improved wellbeing (See Insight Endometriosis Information Sheet - Pain and Recovery Cycle).

MANAGING AND TREATING PAIN

Acute Pain

Common treatments for acute pain include pain relief medications such as paracetamol, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDS) such as ibuprofen, naproxen or diclofenac. Ice and heat can also help with acute pain and bandages can be used to provide compression and support.

Chronic Pain

The goal of treatment of chronic pain is to reduce the pain and increase your ability to do the things you want to do. With chronic pain medication alone is not an effective way to manage the pain because of the harmful side effects of using them on an ongoing basis. Non-medication treatments and strategies for helping to cope with pain and come to terms with it are more effective. Our fact sheets on Complementary Therapies for Endometriosis and Pain Management Techniques for Endometriosis may be helpful in establishing strategies.

For further information:

- Insight Endometriosis: Complementary Therapies for Endometriosis
- Insight Endometriosis: Pain Management Techniques for Endometriosis
- Insight Endometriosis: Pacing for Pain Management
- Insight Endometriosis: Pacing Plan Template
- Insight Endometriosis: Pain and Recovery Cycle

References:

- Health Navigator
<http://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/>

Visit: www.insightendometriosis.org.nz

Email: info@insightendometriosis.org.nz

Call: 07 855 5123



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