

Alternative or Complementary Ways to Control Pain

There are many ways to help manage pain. Medicine is one way, but other methods can be used along with medicine. Sometimes these other treatments may be used without medicine to control pain. Many can be used any place or any time. Some do not cost anything.

Some of these treatments, after study, are becoming more widely accepted as safe and effective treatments. However, for many there is no proof that they are safe or that they work.

Therapies that are considered to have some benefit, proven or from patient reports, are:

Acupuncture. Acupuncture is a procedure in which a licensed practitioner inserts needles into specific points on the skin. It has been shown to be effective in treating some forms of pain, such as headache, osteoarthritis of the knee, and chronic back pain. It appears to stimulate the release of the body's natural painkillers.

Art and Music Therapies. Sometimes art and music therapy can help control pain. Using art materials or music, you may:

- Learn more about your feelings.
- Find it easier to express your feelings.
- Feel better about yourself.
- Develop healthier ways to cope with problems.
- Find distraction from the pain.

Biofeedback. Biofeedback is a technique that helps you learn how to be more aware of your body's response to pain and how to cope with it. It helps you learn to control stress, tension, and anxiety. A machine monitors changes in your body, like your blood pressure and breathing rate. The machine tells you right away how well a relaxation exercise is working—for example, if your blood pressure and breathing rate are going down. This helps you learn how to relax better. It may be done at a healthcare provider's office or you can get machines to use at home. Biofeedback has been found to be helpful for migraine headaches and chronic body pain.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT focuses on how you think about yourself. It can change both your mood and behavior by helping you change negative thoughts about the pain. It can help you feel less anxious and stressed, which can help decrease your pain.

Chiropractic or Osteopathic Manipulation. Chiropractic providers use their hands to move and adjust the joints, especially the joints of the spine. It may ease pain in the back, neck, or joints. Sometimes it helps relieve the pain of headaches, muscle spasms, and inflamed nerves. Treatments should involve slow, gentle movements of the head, neck, and spine. Adjustments that are too rapid can

cause injury. Ask your healthcare provider for a recommendation for a chiropractor.

Osteopathic physicians are trained in medicine, plus techniques for movement of the spine, joints, and muscles. They use their hands to move the joints and muscles by stretching and applying pressure or resistance. Osteopathic manipulation of the spine may improve flexibility and reduce pain in the back. Sometimes the treatment is combined with physical therapy and instruction in proper posture.

Distraction. Focusing on something else can be a powerful way to temporarily relieve even the most intense pain. Try focusing on music, hobbies, social activities, TV, or talking to family or friends. This can work well while you are waiting for pain medicines to take effect. Listening to music during painful procedures can be helpful.

Exercise. Range-of-motion exercises can improve function and lessen pain. Another kind of exercise is water therapy (hydrotherapy), using swimming pools, hot tubs, or whirlpools. Physical exercise programs such as qi gong or tai chi can also help control pain. Regular exercise can help you feel and sleep better. Your healthcare provider or a physical therapist can prescribe an exercise program or direct you to community resources.

Herbs and Supplements. Some herbs and supplements may help reduce pain. Yerba mate tea has been found to decrease pain during chemotherapy. Valerian may reduce pain and promote rest and sleep. Feverfew might help prevent migraine headaches. Probiotics included in some brands of yogurt can reduce abdominal pain and bloating.

Herbs can interact with other medicines you may be taking. Talk with your provider or pharmacist before you use herbs and supplements to manage your pain. You want to make sure there are no possible harmful interactions with your regular medicines.

Hypnosis. Hypnosis puts you in a state of deep relaxation. While you are hypnotized, the hypnotist can suggest different ways to experience the pain, so that it may bother you less. You can also use audio tapes for self-hypnosis at home. The tapes may be more effective after you have experienced hypnosis by a trained therapist. The therapist can suggest ways to use self-hypnosis at home.

Ice and heat. You will learn over time what helps you the most. As a general guide:

- **Ice.** During an acute flare-up, ice may be more helpful than heat at first. Try putting an ice pack, gel pack, or package of frozen vegetables wrapped in a cloth on the painful area every 3 to 4 hours for up to 20 minutes at a time, 1 to 4 times a day.
- **Heat.** After the first day or so (or earlier if you don't have any redness or swelling), heat may be more comforting to the painful area. You can apply heat with warm baths, showers, or hot tub. Or you can use heating pad set at low or a covered hot water bottle for 20 to 30 minutes at a time.

Magnetic Therapy. An area being studied for relief of pain is magnetic therapy. Pulsating electromagnetic therapy has been used to help bone fractures heal. It has been claimed, but not yet proven, that it can be helpful for osteoarthritis, migraine headaches, multiple sclerosis, and sleep disorders. Magnet products include shoe insoles, mattress pads, pillows, belts, jewelry, headwear, and bandages. Magnetic therapy should **not** be used if you have a medical device such as a pacemaker. The magnet may interfere with the device.

Massage. Massage has been found to be helpful for various types of chronic body pain. It can block pain messages getting to your brain, increase blood flow and warm the area, and help to relax tense muscles. Massages can be given by a trained massage therapist or a caregiver. You can also buy massage tools or devices to add vibration or heat to a massage.

A gentle stroking massage is safest. Avoid a vigorous massage by someone untrained in massage. Don't massage areas that are red or swollen.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Mindfulness is a program that teaches you to be more aware of the present moment. You focus only on what is happening right now and don't think about the past or the future. This can help you to accept negative thoughts and feelings and let them go. It increases your awareness of your immediate situation and environment and helps you appreciate the present. Practicing this focus on daily life has been found to be helpful for people with chronic pain.

Nutrition. Foods can affect pain. Some foods may make headaches, joint pains, or digestive pains worse. It may help to keep a diary of the food you eat and your pain symptoms. The diary can help you see if foods affect your pattern of pain. Although, you may find that some foods make you feel worse, some may help you feel better.

Chronic pain can be associated with a low mood and depression. An effective way to help even out your mood is to eat a balanced diet of protein (lean meats, low fat dairy products, beans, nuts and seeds) and carbohydrates (whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables). Limit sugar, saturated fats, and alcohol. A healthy diet, eaten in regularly spaced meals throughout the day, can help keep your blood sugar at a steady level. It can also allow a steady level of endorphins, the brain's feel-good chemicals.

You may find that you feel better when you eat foods that contain omega-3 oils, such as salmon, flaxseeds and walnuts. Other foods that may help improve your mood and decrease your pain are low-fat and nonfat milk products, almonds, Brazil nuts, dark chocolate (1 ounce a day), and dark leafy greens such as spinach. Coffee, in small amounts (about 1 cup) can improve mood, but the acid and caffeine in a lot of coffee (even decaf) might make you feel worse.

Comfort foods have been used for years to ease pain and improve low mood. They are different for each person but usually are foods like mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and ice cream. These foods are easily digested carbohydrates that turn to serotonin, a calming brain chemical. They can be soothing and fine in moderation, but they can lead to weight gain, high blood sugar, and guilt if you eat too much.

Orthopedic Devices. Several devices are available that may improve function and relieve pain. Examples of such devices are wraps, pressure stockings, splints, and neck collars.

Relaxation. Relaxation reduces tension in the muscles. This helps keep pain from getting worse. Relaxation can give you more energy and make you less tired. It may reduce anxiety and allow other pain relief methods to work better. You may be able to fall asleep more easily. Examples of relaxation methods are deep breathing and progressive relaxation. Progressive relaxation involves tensing and relaxing different muscle groups. Yoga and meditation are other ways to relax.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS). TENS may relieve pain by sending small electrical impulses to your nerves through electrodes placed on the skin. The electrical impulses decrease the ability of nerves to carry pain messages to the brain. Usually you wear a small, lightweight box, referred to as a TENS unit, at your waist. The box generates the electrical impulses. You may use the TENS unit for weeks or months.

TENS has not been found to help headaches, but it does seem to give at least temporary relief from nerve pain.

Visualization. You can try seeing an image of the pain and then changing the image. For example, you might imagine the pain as a red-hot fire. You may then imagine the pain lessening as water puts out the fire. You can use audio tapes to learn this technique. Therapists can also help you learn this skill.

Many unproven remedies come from people who share misinformation and personal experiences with others. Products and devices can be useful for some purposes but worthless for others. Some remedies can be dangerous. Examples are coffee enemas for cancer, motor oil for arthritis, and iron supplements for energy. Tell your provider about any therapy that you are using or considering, including any kind of supplements, changes in your diet, or devices that might do more harm than good.

Select an alternative or complementary medicine provider carefully. There is no national standard of practice (credentialing) for such providers, so ask about their training and experience.

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