

# Chronic pain in the young

## *The Health Column*

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For some people, including children and adolescents, pain is their constant companion, always a part of their lives. Although many of us have experienced pain, this pain (known as acute pain) goes away quite quickly. We can then resume our lives as normal. However for others, their pain does not go away. It remains beyond the time expected for healing. This is called chronic pain.



Chronic pain is commonly classified as lasting longer than three months. It is continuous or returns regularly. Chronic pain may also begin as acute and then persist for long periods of time.

Chronic pain affects one-in-five Australians including adolescents and children. For those over the age of 65, one-in-three people experience chronic pain. It is projected that as Australia's population ages, 5 million people will be affected by chronic pain by 2050. Between 25–35 per cent of children who live with chronic pain, mainly adolescents and especially young girls.

Causes of chronic pain are often difficult to identify. It may be due to surgery or trauma or other conditions but it can also exist without a clearly defined reason. This makes chronic pain very difficult to manage. In children and adolescents, chronic pain may be due to a wide range of medical conditions such as juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, scoliosis, cancer, migraine and chronic abdominal pain, or as a result of spinal cord injuries. If this pain is left untreated, children and adolescents may not be able to attend school, participate in sporting or other activities, and become socially withdrawn, depressed and unable to achieve their potential.

Parents and carers should seek medical advice if their children or adolescents are complaining of pain on a regular basis. A child may also express their pain by holding their body in an abnormal position, through lack of facial expression and interest in their surroundings, by being very quiet and withdrawn, losing their appetite, unable to sleep or poor school performance.

Managing chronic pain can be difficult. Some forms of chronic pain can be managed with medicine or surgery while other types of chronic pain, such as migraine, may be far more difficult to treat. Both non-drug treatment such as physiotherapy, acupuncture, relaxation training, meditation, psychotherapy, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) and medicines may help chronic pain.

Medicines are used to treat chronic pain in children and adolescents. After the pain has been assessed and the intensity defined, the doctor may prescribe medicine to help control the pain. It may not completely stop the pain but enable the child or adolescent to participate more actively in

daily activities. It is important that the medicine is taken regularly according to the doctor's instructions. There are specialised pain clinics for children at some general hospitals and specialised children's hospitals.

Your local pharmacist can help too. One of the key aspects to managing chronic pain is medicine management. Pharmacists are medicines experts and can assist you with understanding how your medicines work and any possible side effects. Pharmacies also offer services which can help people living with chronic pain maintain their independence. For example, home delivery, pain management services, and medication management services such as dose administration aids.

In addition, you can get more information on pain from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. Self Care Fact Cards available from these pharmacies include topics such as *Pain relievers* and *Chronic pain*.

National Pain Week runs from 20–26 July 2015. The theme of this National Pain Week 2015 is 'Pain: Let's Talk About It'. Visit your local pharmacy during National Pain Week ([www.chronicpinaustralia.org.au/](http://www.chronicpinaustralia.org.au/)) to 'talk about it' and find out how they can help.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.