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CreakyJoints Presents

Pain Explained: Health and Wellness – A Holistic Approach (Part 4)

What are complementary treatments and what does the science says about them?

As we have learned from *Pain Explained: Where to Start (Part 3)*, we know that using multiple treatment approaches is beneficial in managing chronic pain. In addition to medication, there are other therapies such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, and psychotherapy. People living with a chronic condition may want to discuss these approaches with their doctor. These therapies are often referred to as complementary therapies – treatments that “complement” or may be used in addition to medical treatment.

Complementary and alternative approaches include: exercises like aquatic exercises, Tai Chi, and yoga, physical therapy, massage therapy, hydrotherapy, CBD (cannabidiol), medical marijuana, relaxation therapy or meditation, biofeedback, hypnosis, nutrition, dietary herbs and supplements, weight management, acupuncture and chiropractic care, among others.

One thing to be aware of before trying any complementary therapy treatment is there is limited scientific evidence that proves these therapies work to relieve symptoms. While there is promising research being conducted, you may run across what is considered “low-quality studies” on the internet. A “low-quality” study means that the study was either not a clinical trial or there is only one study reporting these findings rather than multiple confirming studies. We will talk more about clinical trials in *Pain Explained: How Do I Keep Going? (Part 6)*. Even if there are not additional studies confirming their findings, this research can still provide useful information.

Also, in evaluating research, always be aware of information promoted by parties with a specific interest (either financial or political). Their findings might be based on limited or biased data.

Despite the need for additional research in this area, complementary and alternative therapies still may help you manage your pain. They may also help you cope with your symptoms or the day-to-day experience of having a chronic illness. Always discuss all treatment options, which should be examined closely with your doctor.

Let’s talk about a few complementary treatments. We will start with acupuncture.

According to the Journal of General Medicine, recent research shows that acupuncture may provide some benefits for people with chronic conditions such as those living with musculoskeletal back, neck, migraine and osteoarthritis pain (McKee, et al., 2020). This ancient healing practice uses thin needles that are inserted into specific points on the body. Acupuncture is meant to help balance your body's natural energy flow. Notably, the National Institute of Health's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health states that, "Researchers don't fully understand how acupuncture works. It might aid the activity of your body's pain-killing chemicals. It also might affect how you release chemicals that regulate blood pressure and flow" (NIH, 2016).

Acupuncture should always be performed by a licensed acupuncturist who has completed a master's degree or higher level of training. Individual acupuncture sessions are typically performed once or twice a week, depending on the individual and the condition being treated. Group sessions are also an option, where one acupuncturist treats several patients at a time. Further, group acupuncture can decrease cost and increase capacity for acupuncturists to provide services (Chuang, 2018) This is especially beneficial in communities and neighborhoods with fewer or limited resources (McKee, 2019).

In a PCORI-funded study called, [Comparing Group and Individual Acupuncture Therapy for Treating Chronic Pain among Ethnically Diverse Patients with Low Incomes -- AADDOPT-2](#), the research team wanted to show whether group acupuncture sessions were as effective as one-on-one sessions. The study included 706 patients with chronic back or neck pain or pain from osteoarthritis, receiving care at six health centers in Bronx, New York. They found that 30 percent of patients who had group acupuncture sessions reported large decreases in how much pain disrupted their daily life, compared with 38 percent of those who had individual sessions, within three months after the study ended (McKee, 2019). Overall, the patients in both groups valued their acupuncture experiences, while noting various pros and cons to the different treatment settings.

When considering acupuncture for chronic pain, you may want to explore the potential benefits of both individual and group acupuncture with your healthcare provider.

In addition to acupuncture, there are many other options you may wish to consider. As always, benefits and risks should be discussed with your doctor before trying anything new. It is also important to note that insurance coverage varies, so check with your insurance provider to learn more.

Learn about health and wellness strategies to better manage your pain

There is evidence to suggest that diet is linked to pain, but there is no one-size-fits-all diet, as everyone is different. Regardless of the approach you choose, make sure it meets your nutritional needs to help you maintain energy and combat fatigue. Some diets to ask your

doctor about include anti-inflammatory, gluten-free, dairy-free, among others. Talk to a health care provider who is knowledgeable about nutrition.

Through the CreakyJoints community, we have many helpful resources such as articles that take a closer look at [anti-inflammatory diets](#), and webinars on topics such as [Understanding Complementary and Alternative Medicine \(CAM\) for Autoimmune Disease](#) and [Can Your Diet Help Treat Inflammatory and Autoimmune Disease?](#) .

Some of you may have also tried herbal and dietary supplements. There are many to choose from, but there's not much solid, scientific evidence to show those really work. High quality research on natural products and dietary supplements are difficult to obtain due to the high cost of conducting research and the difficulty manufacturers face in patenting natural products. In almost every case, herbs and supplements need to be researched more to determine whether they will work for chronic pain or not.

Before you take any herbal treatments or dietary supplements, including vitamins or minerals, let your doctor know. Some herbs and supplements can actually cause negative interactions or add to the effects of current medications. So, again, always let your doctor know everything you are taking to manage your pain.

Now, let's move on to another important topic: exercise.

Exercise may be the last thing you want to do when you're battling the fatigue, pain, and the psychological impacts that come along with chronic pain conditions, but many people find that once they increase physical activity, it helps ease symptoms. Options range from walking, to strength training, Tai Chi, yoga and more. Your doctor can advise you as to which exercise is the safest for you.

Next, we will take a look an example of how exercise plays an important role in treatment decisions and interventions.

Lumbar spinal stenosis (LSS) is a common condition among older adults and it occurs in the space between vertebrae in the spine narrows. This narrowing can cause pressure on the nerves in the lower back, which can cause pain and can make it difficult to walk. Doctors often recommend spine surgery for adults older than 65 to improve symptoms, but, of course, many people prefer to avoid back surgery if they can.

In a PCORI-funded study called, [Comparing the Effectiveness of Nonsurgical Treatments for Lumbar Spinal Stenosis in Reducing Pain and Increasing Walking Ability](#), the research team wanted to see if treatments that do not involve surgery helped improve patients' symptoms (Schneider, et al., 2019).

In the study, 259 patients, ages 60 or older, with LSS that led to difficulty walking, were compared in three separate treatment groups. These 3 groups were: 1. People who were treated with pain medicine, 2. People who were treated with group exercise classes, and 3. People who were treated with chiropractic plus physical therapy.

Let's take a look at what they found in the first 6 months.

1. Those who had chiropractic and physical therapy had more improvement in pain than patients who exercised or used pain medicine.
2. Patients who exercised and patients who used pain medicine showed the same amount of improvement in pain.
3. All three groups showed the same improvement in pain and walking ability six months after the study started.

Patients who exercised had more daily activity compared to patients who took medicine two months after the study began. These improvements didn't last, however, when the team looked at daily activity again at six months.

Perhaps most notably, at six months, a total of only out of the 259 research participants reported having spinal surgery, with no significant differences in surgery rates between the 3 groups (Schneider, et al., 2019).

So, what does this mean?

Depending on the individual, alternative treatment options for LSS might reduce the need for spine surgery in older adults as well as the need for pain medication interventions (Schneider, et al., 2019). Therefore, you and your healthcare provider may want to explore nonsurgical interventions such as exercise, chiropractic care, and/or physical therapy when appropriate.

What stress management techniques may be applied to your treatment plan?

You may be stressed from having a chronic condition, or your stress may be making your symptoms worse—or both—that is why stress management techniques can be particularly helpful in managing pain.

Relaxation therapies include biofeedback, self-hypnosis, deep breathing techniques, meditation, and guided imagery. There are therapists trained to help you learn to practice these relaxation techniques properly. You can also teach yourself to do them by using online videos on YouTube or apps such as Headspace and Calm. Tai Chi and yoga may also be done in combination with techniques like meditation to help you relax.

We will hear more about yoga techniques from an expert in this area in the next podcast session with Dr. Steffany Moonaz of Yoga for Arthritis.

Relaxation can be very important when it comes dealing with pain in many ways, such as helping you manage stress, overall wellbeing, and fatigue. Let's talk about fatigue.

When you are in pain it can be very difficult to get a good night's rest.

In a [2019 Community Poll](#), members of CreakyJoints and ArthritisPower, our patient-powered research registry, were asked about whether they wished they were able to sleep better at night; 95 percent of 1,886 respondents said yes.

So, what can a person do about pain-disturbed sleep?

First, it is important to practice good sleep hygiene. Recommendations include going to bed at the same time and waking up at the same time each day, avoiding electronics about 30 minutes or more before bed, and keeping your room at a comfortable temperature (National Sleep Foundation, 2020). Also, talk to your doctor about a safe physical activity that you can take part in during the day, as this has been shown to help with sleep as well. As we've discussed in previous sections, because pain has a psychological aspect, it can weigh heavy on our minds. Practicing relaxation techniques and considering cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), as discussed in *Pain Explained: Where to Start (Part 3)*, can help you develop coping skills and potentially lead to a better night's sleep.

Mind and body practices are also beneficial in the treatment of pain.

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health states that examples of mind-body and practices include acupuncture, massage therapy, meditation, relaxation techniques, and yoga (NIH, 2017).

In another PCORI-funded study, researchers wanted to know: [Do Group Medical Visits with a Focus on Mind and Body Help Patients with Chronic Pain and Symptoms of Depression?](#)

159 patients with chronic pain and depression symptoms participated in this study. Patients received care at three health clinics serving low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Massachusetts. The study included patients with a range of races and ages, and it explored whether mind and body practices helped participants to reduce chronic pain and symptoms of depression. Researchers found several benefits including that many patients were less likely to use pain medication, including opioids. Results also showed that these patients had a better quality of life related to mental health and fewer emergency room visits, compared to those who did not incorporate mind and body practices as part of their treatment plan (Gardiner, et al., 2019).

In the next three podcast sessions, Dr. Steffany Moonaz will share with us more on mind and body practices, the science behind yoga, as well as provide an overview of mindfulness and meditation.

Thank you for listening and we hope you found this information helpful. Remember to take the one question quiz to receive your free resources.