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CreakyJoints Presents

Pain Explained: What is Chronic Pain? (Part 1)

The difference between chronic pain and acute pain

More than 116 million Americans have chronic pain (Thorn, et al., 2018). [The International Association for the Study of Pain's](#) definition of pain is “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage” (IASP, 2017).

We all experience pain every now and then. But when pain does not go away for more than three months; we refer to it as chronic pain. In this case pain lasts for longer periods of time—sometimes months, even years and sometimes even a lifetime. Pain that is chronic can come and go, and you may experience different levels of intensity.

Examples of chronic pain conditions that may be familiar to some of us include arthritis, such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, Ankylosing Spondylitis, Osteoarthritis, Lower Back Pain, Fibromyalgia, rheumatic conditions and other autoimmune forms of arthritis. These are all diseases that cause chronic pain.

To understand the definition of chronic pain we often compare it to acute pain. Chronic pain is often understood as the opposite as acute pain.

So, what then is acute pain? Acute pain is pain that is directly related to the injury or damage—so, for example, you cut your finger and you experience pain, that's acute pain; you walk along the sidewalk and you trip and sprain your ankle, that is acute pain. Acute pain is protective. It tells you something is wrong or that there is an injury. An arthritis flare, which is a concentrated period of time when you experience intense pain due to your arthritis, is also acute pain.

In contrast to acute pain—chronic pain is pain that may start off with an injury, it can start off as acute pain, but it continues long after the damage has already occurred. There are many reasons for chronic pain. It can stem from an injury, but it can be caused because of an underlying illness—as we've seen with arthritis and other conditions.

We experience different types of pain and in order to communicate the different types of pain we use different words. Let's talk more about this.

The many ways in which chronic pain is experienced and the reason behind it

[PainSpot](#), developed by CreakyJoints, is a helpful tool designed for you to use. It can help you understand why you may be in pain. The first version of PainSpot was created by Doug Roberts, MD, an independent clinical rheumatologist with over 30 years of experience diagnosing and treating patients with arthritis and musculoskeletal diseases. Dr. Roberts saw firsthand how his patients struggled to understand the causes of their pain while experiencing frustrating delays getting to the right doctor, the right diagnosis, and the right treatment plan.

PainSpot asks a series of questions—based on how the nation’s leading doctors actually diagnose pain—and it suggests possible conditions that you can bring to your health care provider for a more informed discussion and evaluation. To learn more, visit [Painspot.org](#).

Identifying where your pain is located is important in helping you find the right treatment. Along with determining where the pain is occurring in your body, the different words we use to communicate our experience of pain can contain very important information for your doctor.

Some of the words used by our patient community members to describe their pain include throbbing, dull, burning, shooting or nagging. Perhaps these words resonate with you.

For example, in neuropathic pain you may experience a shooting or burning sensation caused by damage to the nerve fibers. Pain you experience from shingles is of this type. Diabetes is another chronic condition that occurs when your blood glucose or blood sugar is too high. This can cause nerve damage and hence nerve pain in diabetes is referred to as diabetic neuropathy. You may feel this in your feet as a tingling in your toes.

Inflammatory pain can be experienced as stiffness, tenderness or even visually as redness. Within the [CreakyJoints](#) community many of our patients experience this type of pain. CreakyJoints is the education arm of the [Global Healthy Living Foundation](#), and our online support community with more than 70,000 patients*, consisting of many arthritis patients.

There is also mechanical/compressive pain often felt in the body’s support structure, which includes the spinal joints, discs, and the soft tissues. You may have had or know of someone who has had a herniated disc or what is commonly referred to as ‘slipped disc’. The pain experienced in this condition may be due to mechanical or compressive pain. This type of pain may radiate out from the spine to muscles and ligaments—so back pain may be felt in the thighs or the buttocks.

Communicating your experience of pain can provide clues to your doctor on what the cause might be.

Further, Dr. Beverly Thorn, one of our esteemed advisors on this project has conducted research along with her team, which takes a look at how patients may cope more effectively with chronic pain.

We will learn more from Dr. Thorn herself in parts 2 and 3 of the *Pain Explained* series. However, you can read more by visiting the [Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute \(PCORI\) website](#), an organization which provided support for her research: [Study Finds Usefulness of Pain Education and Therapy for People with Low Incomes](#) (PCORI, 2018). Stay tuned for more details coming up.

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

**Update: As of April 2020, there were 82,000 members in the CreakyJoints community.*