



# Methods for Managing Chronic Pain Other Than Medication



Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use: A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers

**Introduction** | Research studies show that methods other than medications can reduce chronic pain and can improve overall health.<sup>1,2,3</sup> It can take trial and error and time to find the pain control methods that work for you. Methods for managing chronic pain that don't use medication usually have few or no side effects. They also may have added benefits. The benefits can include lower stress and feeling happier and the chance to join a supportive community. The types of treatments are:



Exercise



Yoga



Mindfulness and meditation



Cognitive behavioral therapy



Acupuncture



Massage



**EXERCISE** | Physical activity that includes flexibility and range of motion, strengthening, and aerobic exercise, done regularly as part of a daily routine.

Benefits	Risks	Research Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increases physical function and reduces pain in the short term. Possibly reduces pain in the longer term.</li> <li>Relieves stress and improves mood.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discomfort may occur when you first start a physical activity program, especially if the activity is not increased gradually.</li> </ul>	<p>Improves physical function and relieves pain associated with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Osteoarthritis of the knee</li> <li>Osteoarthritis of the hip</li> <li>Chronic low-back pain</li> </ul> <p>Improves function associated with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rheumatoid arthritis</li> </ul>

(Continued)

**If you cannot get down on the floor or stand for a long time:**

- **Water exercise** is a good option. The water can make movement less painful and can help with strength, coordination, and balance. If you have a hard time entering a pool, look for one with a lift or a gradual slope into the water.
- **Chair exercise** has the same benefits as floor exercise. You can find chair exercise classes online, or they may be offered in your community. See the Yoga section below.

**General Considerations**

- Start slowly and gradually increase your activity to avoid an increase in pain and possible injury. If you are not active, consider starting with a light exercise program. Your provider or a physical therapist can suggest one that is best for you.
- Avoid activity involving an injured body part. Give it time to heal; then start exercising slowly again.
- Build up to 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise spread out over a week. Examples include brisk walking and swimming. Do light stretching exercises three to five times each week.
- Do gentle range-of-motion exercises in the morning to ease stiffness. *Range of motion* means moving your joints in different directions. Range-of-motion exercises can improve how your joints move and joint function.

**Resources and More Information**

- [American College of Rheumatology: Exercise and Arthritis](#)
- [Sit and Be Fit™](#)
- [HelpGuide: Exercise and Fitness](#)
- [National Health Service: Exercise](#)
- [National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability](#)



**YOGA** | A mind and body practice with origins in ancient India. Combines physical postures with breathing techniques, meditation, and relaxation.<sup>4</sup>

Benefits	Risks	Research Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Builds strength and stamina.</li><li>■ Improves flexibility, coordination, and balance.</li><li>■ Relaxes the body and mind.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Serious injuries are rare. Injury may occur if the body is not aligned correctly during a pose or if yoga exercises are done beyond one's ability.<sup>5</sup></li></ul>	<p>Improves function and relieves pain associated with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Chronic low-back pain</li></ul>

**If you have physical limitations:**

- Seek out gentle, slow-paced yoga classes that accommodate special needs. Examples include restorative yoga and chair yoga classes for people who can't sit on the floor.
- Talk to the yoga instructor about your limitations. They can modify poses to fit what you can do.
- Look for a yoga instructor who provides helpful feedback.

**General Considerations**

- If a pose hurts, stop doing it. Yoga is a personal practice, so don't compare yourself to others. Everyone works at their own pace and ability.
- Some soreness for a day or two is expected, especially when you start doing yoga. But the pain should not continue.
- Wear comfortable clothing that stretches with movement.

(Continued)

### Resources and More Information

- [Scientific Results of Yoga for Health and Well-Being](#)
- Online yoga classes
  - Beginner chair yoga
    - [Wheelchair yoga with Adrienne](#) (12 minutes)
    - [Moffitt Cancer Center chair yoga](#) (27 minutes)
  - Advanced chair yoga
    - [Chair yoga for people with disabilities](#) (31 minutes)
    - [MBSR \(mindfulness-based stress reduction\) yoga](#) (37 minutes)
    - [Chair yoga for the lower body](#) (19 minutes)



**MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION** | Techniques to respond in a relaxed way to stressors. These include shifting attention to more pleasant thoughts; focusing on the present; and clearing the mind to focus on one thing, such as the breath or sights and sounds in the environment.

Benefits	Risks	Research Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Improves quality of life and reduces anxiety and depression.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ For some people, sadness and anger may increase as they begin practicing mindfulness and meditation. An experienced teacher can guide a person through this experience.</li></ul>	Relieves pain in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Low back</li></ul>

**Considerations if you cannot sit for long periods to meditate:**

- Try meditating while walking or lying down, or meditate in shorter sessions.

**General Considerations**

- Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was developed in 1974 by Jon Kabat-Zinn at Massachusetts General Hospital. MBSR is taught worldwide in a formal, 8-week program. Classes are available in person or online. You can find other options to learn mindfulness by searching the internet or checking in your community.
- When learning meditation, you may become frustrated by distracting or interfering thoughts. This is a normal part of the process. With practice, your mind will learn to become quieter.

### Resources and More Information

- [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#)
- [American Chronic Pain Association Relaxation Video](#)
- [Tara Brach, PhD: Working With Pain—Mindfulness Strategies](#)
- [Palouse Mindfulness MBSR Course](#) (Online and no cost)



**COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)** | In CBT, a counselor will help you learn to change thinking and behavior patterns to reduce distress, calm the nervous system, and decrease pain. CBT helps people increase their awareness of how thoughts, emotions, and actions make pain worse.

Benefits	Risks	Research Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People learn to change their perspective and to view situations more clearly, which improves coping with future challenges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People who have experienced trauma and distress may become upset at first as they work through negative feelings and learn to change their thoughts.</li> </ul>	Helps with function and relieves pain in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low back</li> </ul> Relieves pain due to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Osteoarthritis of the knee</li> </ul>
<b>General Considerations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CBT is provided by a licensed therapist in a limited number of sessions.</li> </ul>		
<b>Resources and More Information</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">CBT for Pain Management</a> (fact sheet)</li> <li><a href="#">Find a CBT Therapist</a></li> <li><a href="#">Find the Right Psychologist for You</a></li> </ul>		



**ACUPUNCTURE** | A traditional Chinese medicine approach that involves inserting thin needles through the skin. This treatment stimulates specific points on the body to change body functions. It can relieve pain.

Benefits	Risks	Research Results <sup>6</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short-term improvements in pain and functioning</li> <li>Improved stress management and well-being; reduced depression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Soreness or minor bruising/bleeding at points where the needles have been inserted.</li> <li>People with a bleeding disorder are more likely to have bleeding and bruising.</li> <li>People with a pacemaker should avoid acupuncture that uses a mild electric current to the needles. The current might interfere with how their pacemaker works.</li> </ul>	Relieves pain due to: <sup>7</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rheumatoid arthritis</li> <li>Osteoarthritis of the knee</li> <li>Low-back pain</li> </ul>

(Continued)

### General Considerations

- Needles may make some people feel uncomfortable, but many people do not feel them being inserted. Some people even report falling asleep during acupuncture sessions.
- Before acupuncture treatment, the person puts on a gown and then lies down on a treatment table.
- The first session usually lasts 60 minutes. Follow-up sessions are done for 6 to 12 weeks.
- Some healthcare insurance plans cover acupuncture treatments. You may need to get a referral from a healthcare provider.
- Make sure your acupuncturist has proper training and credentials.

### Resources and More Information

- [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health: Acupuncture in Depth](#)
- To find a certified acupuncturist in your area, visit this [directory](#).



**MASSAGE** | A technique that involves rubbing and kneading the muscles. A massage therapist uses their hands, forearms, or a device to massage the muscles. They also use lotion to reduce friction.

Benefits	Risks	Research Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Relaxes the muscles and reduces stiffness and joint pain.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Massage may not be appropriate if you have:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A bleeding disorder or take blood-thinning medicine</li><li>• Burns or healing wounds</li><li>• Deep vein thrombosis</li><li>• Fractures</li><li>• Severe osteoporosis</li><li>• Severe thrombocytopenia (low blood platelets)</li></ul></li></ul>	<p>Helps with function and relieves pain in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Low back</li><li>■ Neck</li></ul>

### General Considerations

- Look for a massage therapist who is certified by the [National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork](#). If your state government requires massage therapists to have a license, check to make sure the massage therapist has a license to practice.
- There are many types of massage. Some methods are better for chronic pain.
- Massage may require taking off your clothes and lying on a massage table. You will be covered by a blanket.

### Resources and More Information

- [How Can I Find the Right Massage Therapist?](#) (University of Minnesota)
- [What Can I Expect in a First Massage Therapy Visit?](#) (University of Minnesota)



## Tips for Overcoming Physical Barriers to Getting Care

- Be willing to ask for help. People will often welcome your guidance on what they can do to assist you.
- Before your appointment, call the office to ask if the exam table can be adjusted for your height. If adjustable tables are not available, ask a staff member to help you. The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) requires healthcare facilities to provide reasonable assistance.
- If you use a wheelchair, let the office staff know ahead of time so they can help you. Ask for the name of the person you talked with.
- Be ready to review your needs with the front desk staff and provider (for example, if you need help changing into a gown).
- Wear clothing that is loose and easy to remove and put back on.
- Be prepared to lie flat on an exam table, if you can. If you need to be repositioned after lying flat for a long time, or if you cannot lie flat, explain how you need to be positioned.
- Let your provider know about any areas that are sensitive to touch or painful to lie on.



**For more information visit:** Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use:  
A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers | [KnowledgeHub.air.org](https://KnowledgeHub.air.org)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Skelly, A. C., Chou, R., Dettori, J. R., Turner, J. A., Friedly, J. L., Rundell, S. D., . . . Ferguson, A. J. R. (2020). *Noninvasive nonpharmacological treatment for chronic pain: A systematic review update*. *Comparative Effectiveness Review No. 227*. Comparative effectiveness review no. 227. AHRQ Publication No. 20-EHC009. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Retrieved from <https://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/noninvasive-nonpharm-pain-update.pdf>
- 2 Vliet Vlieland, T. P. M. (2007). Non-drug care for RA—Is the era of evidence-based practice approaching? *Rheumatology*, 46(9), 1397–1404. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/rheumatology/article/46/9/1397/1789052>
- 3 Paley, C. A., & Johnson, M. I. (2020). Acupuncture for the relief of chronic pain: A synthesis of systematic reviews. *Medicina*, 56(1), 6.
- 4 National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. (2021). Yoga: What you need to know. Retrieved from <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga-what-you-need-to-know>
- 5 National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. (2021). What are the risks of yoga? Retrieved from <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga-what-you-need-to-know#:~:text=The%20most%20common%20injuries%20are,particularly%20cautious%20when%20practicing%20yoga>
- 6 Vliet Vlieland, T. P. M. (2007). Non-drug care for RA—Is the era of evidence-based practice approaching? *Rheumatology*, 46(9), 1397–1404. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/rheumatology/article/46/9/1397/1789052>
- 7 Paley, C. A., & Johnson, M. I. (2020). Acupuncture for the relief of chronic pain: A synthesis of systematic reviews. *Medicina*, 56(1), 6.

Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use: A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers was developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), grant number 90DPGE0006. NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this brief do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, and HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

## About the American Institutes for Research

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. AIR's work is driven by its mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit [www.air.org](http://www.air.org).



1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor | Arlington, VA 22202-3239 | 202.403.5000

[www.air.org](http://www.air.org)