SYMPTOM

Pain

Pain is an unpleasant physical and emotional feeling linked to actual or possible harm.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, burning, stabbing, throbbing, tenderness, or soreness

WHERE IT IS FELT
Anywhere in the body, in one area or several

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Minor injury, muscle strain, inflammation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden severe pain with weakness, chest pressure, or breathing trouble

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to months, based on the cause and recovery

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists, returns, or limits sleep or daily activities

Overview

Pain is the body's warning and protection system. It can follow an injury, illness, inflammation, or irritation of a nerve. Pain is also shaped by sleep, stress, mood, past experiences, and how the nervous system processes signals.

Pain may be acute , meaning it begins suddenly and is expected to improve as the cause heals. Pain lasting more than 3 months is commonly called chronic pain . Chronic pain may continue after an injury has healed or occur without clear damage on a scan.

Pain is personal. Two people with similar injuries may feel different levels of pain. This does not mean that either person's pain is imagined or unimportant.

What it may feel or look like

Pain may be dull, sharp, cramping, burning, shooting, throbbing, tight, or tender. It may stay in one place or spread elsewhere. For example, pain from the lower back may travel into a leg.

You may also notice stiffness, swelling, reduced movement, tingling, numbness, tiredness, disturbed sleep, or sensitivity to touch. Nerve pain often feels like burning, electric shocks, or

pins and needles.

The intensity can be mild to severe and may change during the day. Movement, meals, coughing, stress, posture, or certain activities may make it better or worse.

Common causes

Many everyday conditions can cause pain. The location, timing, and other symptoms help narrow down the possibilities.

Common causes include:

Less common causes include arthritis, autoimmune disease, nerve damage, kidney or gallbladder problems, and conditions affecting internal organs. Some medicines or medical treatments can also cause pain.

Cancer can cause pain, but it is a much less common explanation than injury, overuse, or non-cancerous illness. Pain alone cannot show what the cause is.

Occasionally, sudden pain is related to a condition needing urgent treatment, such as a heart attack, stroke, serious infection, blood-flow problem, or internal injury. These usually cause other warning signs as well.

- Minor injuries, bruises, sprains, and muscle strains
- Overuse from work, exercise, or repeated movements
- Headaches, migraine, or menstrual cramps
- Infections and short-term illnesses
- Inflammation in muscles, joints, or other tissues
- Recovery after surgery or another medical procedure

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if pain is sudden or severe and occurs with:

Seek same-day medical care for severe or rapidly worsening pain, particularly with fever, repeated vomiting, a hot swollen joint, new vision changes, or a pale or cold limb. Sudden severe testicular pain also needs immediate assessment. During pregnancy, seek urgent advice for severe abdominal or pelvic pain, especially with bleeding, dizziness, or shoulder pain.

Arrange a routine appointment if pain lasts longer than expected, keeps returning, wakes you regularly, or affects work and daily activities. You should also book an appointment if you

develop ongoing numbness, weakness, unexplained weight loss, or need non-prescription pain medicine frequently.

- Chest pressure, difficulty breathing, sweating, or fainting
- New weakness on one side, facial drooping, confusion, or trouble speaking
- A sudden, extremely severe headache
- A major injury, uncontrolled bleeding, or a limb that looks misshapen
- Loss of bladder or bowel control with numbness around the groin
- Severe pain with collapse, extreme drowsiness, or blue-grey lips

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask where the pain is, when it began, what it feels like, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about injuries, illnesses, medicines, sleep, mood, and the effect on your daily life.

An examination may check movement, strength, sensation, swelling, circulation, or tenderness. Depending on your symptoms, you may need blood tests, urine tests, an X-ray, or another scan. Many common pain problems do not require imaging.

There is no blood test or scan that directly measures pain. Normal test results do not mean the pain is not real. Sometimes the cause becomes clearer through follow-up rather than during one appointment.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause, duration, and effect of the pain. The aim may be to treat an underlying condition, support healing, reduce pain, and help you stay active.

For a minor injury or strain, brief relative rest can help, but complete inactivity may slow recovery. Gentle movement can prevent stiffness. A wrapped cold pack may help a recent injury, while warmth may ease muscle tightness. Protect your skin from direct heat or ice.

Regular sleep, gradual activity, relaxation exercises, and pacing tasks can help, especially when pain is persistent. Pacing means balancing activity and rest rather than doing too much on a good day and needing prolonged recovery afterward.

Non-prescription medicines such as paracetamol, also called acetaminophen, or anti-inflammatory medicines may help some types of pain. They are not suitable for everyone.

Follow the label and ask a pharmacist or healthcare professional if you take other medicines, are pregnant, or have kidney, liver, stomach, heart, or bleeding problems.

Treatment may also include physiotherapy, psychological support for coping with persistent pain, or medicines aimed at nerve pain. Prescription opioids like oxycodone or morphine have important risks, including dependence and overdose, and require an individual discussion about expected benefits and harms.

What to expect

Pain from a minor injury or short-term illness often improves as the body heals. Persistent pain may fluctuate rather than disappear steadily.

For long-lasting pain, improvement may mean better sleep, movement, work, or daily function even if some pain remains. Follow-up is useful when the plan is not helping, side effects occur, or the nature of the pain changes. New warning signs should be assessed rather than assumed to be part of an existing pain problem.

Common questions

Does severe pain always mean severe damage?

No. Pain intensity and tissue damage do not always match. Migraine and nerve pain can be severe without visible injury, while some serious conditions initially cause little pain. The wider pattern of symptoms matters.

Why can pain continue after an injury heals?

The nervous system can become more sensitive after prolonged pain. Signals that were once protective may continue or become easier to trigger. This is a physical process, although sleep, stress, and mood can influence it.

Should I exercise when I am in pain?

Gentle, gradual movement is often helpful for muscle and joint pain. Stop and seek advice if activity causes sudden severe pain, new weakness, chest symptoms, or a major loss of function. The right type and pace depend on the cause.

Is a pain score useful?

A number from 0 to 10 can help track changes, but it does not tell the whole story. It is also useful to describe how pain affects sleep, walking, concentration, work, and self-care.

Sources

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