



Strategies for managing chronic pain

Along with traditional medications and surgeries, numerous **non-traditional pain management methods can help reduce an individual's chronic pain effectively**. We've compiled the following suggestions to help you consider and evaluate whether they could benefit your patients.

As you review the options, keep in mind:

- This is not an exhaustive list and each individual may see results with different strategies. Members may need to try several approaches to determine which ones provide the help they need.
- Because benefit plans and covered services differ significantly, this list does not indicate whether or not coverage might be available for a specific member. Members need to be aware that they may have to pay for some services.
- Some of these strategies have proven scientific validity when performed by a trained professional with the appropriate licensure, certification or other credentials.
- Type refers to:
 - T = Traditional services. Sometimes referred to as mainstream or conventional medicine, these are typically covered by benefit plans.
 - A = Alternative or complementary services. These are non-mainstream services generally used together with conventional medicine. They may not be covered by benefit plans, and may include self-directed strategies and services that are paid by the member.

Strategy	Type	Comments
Acupuncture	A	Acupuncture is a method of relieving pain or treating illness by placing needles into a person's skin at particular points on the body.
Alcohol and drug abuse treatment	T	Alcohol use can exacerbate the experience of pain, and some medications used to treat pain can lead to addiction.
Behavioral health therapies	T	Living in constant pain can be emotionally distressing and result in depression and anxiety, or can exacerbate existing mental disorders, which also need to be addressed with evidenced-based therapy (such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, below).

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Biofeedback	A	Biofeedback uses feedback from sensors and a computer to give information about the body's stress response and then teaches the patient to control the stress response. This may involve consciously relaxing muscles or changing breathing. Biofeedback has been particularly helpful for headaches and chronic pain, which often causes increased pain due to muscle tension and fatigue. ¹
Chiropractic	A	Chiropractic is a branch of healthcare that focuses on the relationship between the body's structure - mainly the spine - and its function. Conditions commonly treated by chiropractors include back and neck pain, headaches, sports injuries and repetitive strains. Patients also seek treatment of pain associated with other conditions, such as arthritis. ²
Cognitive behavioral therapy	T	Cognitive behavioral therapy explores the relationship between thoughts, emotion and actions, which impacts how a person experiences pain. People are trained in identifying negative thoughts and behaviors, then replacing them with more adaptive alternatives that increase functioning. ¹
Exercise	A	Most people with chronic pain need to keep as physically active as possible. Increased activity levels and education about exercise is recommended since inactivity is detrimental despite the temporary relief of symptoms. Standing up every 15 minutes or using a standing desk can also be helpful. Therapeutic exercise can be classified to include 1) range-of-motion exercises; 2) stretching; 3) strength training; and 4) cardiovascular conditioning. ¹
Massage	A	Therapeutic massage involves soft tissue manipulation using the hands or a mechanical device through a variety of specific methods and should be performed by a trained practitioner. The term "massage therapy" includes many techniques, and the type of massage given usually depends on the person's needs and physical condition. Some scientific evidence points toward beneficial effects on pain and symptoms associated with a number of different conditions, including chronic low-back pain. ³
Meditation	A	Meditation involves using a number of awareness techniques to help quiet the mind and relax the body. Studies suggest that meditating can increase pain tolerance, activity levels, and self-esteem and decrease anxiety, stress, depression and use of pain medications. Mindfulness meditation has been used successfully to reduce pain and improve mood in patients with chronic pain from a variety of conditions, including headache and low back pain.
Physical therapy	T	Physical therapy helps manage chronic pain with treatments that include strengthening and flexibility exercises, manual therapy, posture awareness, and body mechanics instruction. Physical therapists also can help patients understand the underlying cause of their pain.

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Smoking cessation	A	Smoking can increase the sensation of pain, so programs to eliminate a nicotine addiction can help reduce the experience of pain.
Relaxation training	A	Relaxation techniques may contribute to chronic pain management by teaching techniques that support distraction from pain, and improve the person's sense of control and self-efficacy. Learning relaxation techniques may improve body awareness and reduce stress while contributing to improved sleep. Commonly used methods include progressive muscle relaxation and deep diaphragmatic breathing, which are easy to learn, improving the likelihood of patient compliance. ⁴
Sleep improvement training	A T	Pain affects ability to sleep, and the lack of sleep makes the pain seem worse. Researchers have identified a variety of practices and habits—known as “sleep hygiene”—that can help anyone maximize the hours they spend sleeping, even those whose sleep is affected by pain. Physicians, therapists and online programs can teach strategies for improving sleep.
Support groups	A	Gathering with others who share a common health concern can be beneficial for people dealing with chronic pain. Support groups are not the same as group therapy sessions, which are a type of mental health treatment under the guidance of a trained mental health provider. Reaching out to new communities, such as community-based support groups led by a trained professional, can provide awareness that the person is not alone in dealing with the effects of chronic pain.
Tai Chi	A	Tai Chi is a series of soft, flowing movements choreographed into a slow routine. Ongoing research suggests that Tai Chi is an effective treatment in improving physical functioning of those with chronic pain including arthritis, low back pain, and fibromyalgia.
Therapeutic neuroscience education	A	Educating people about the science of nerves changes a person's perception of pain and has a positive therapeutic effect on pain. This education can be obtained by reading books, discussing in counseling sessions, researching online articles and other resources.
Yoga	A	Yoga creates a greater sense of health and well-being by emphasizing mindful practice, breath awareness, and proper body alignment. Yoga helps to manage chronic pain through movements that increase flexibility, strength, and relaxation. Benefits of regular yoga practice include improved sleep and reduced stress and anxiety. Studies have shown that yoga is beneficial for fibromyalgia, among other pain conditions. ¹

References

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