

Differences between acute and chronic pain



The most important difference between acute pain and chronic pain is how long the pain lasts for. Acute pain is pain that usually lasts for up to three months after you get injured. Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than three months - longer than it usually takes for your injury to get better. There may be no difference between how bad the pain feels it could feel just the same when it is acute or chronic.

Acute Pain

Acute pain happens at the time of the actual injury and may continue while you are getting better. The link between acute pain and the injury is usually obvious and how bad the acute pain feels is often depends on how bad the injury is. The worse injury, the greater the pain. Acute pain is essential for our survival.

Acute pain sets off a number of reflexes and automatic responses

- To warn and protect us from harm
- To support us getting better
- Change our behaviour to prevent us getting injured again

We have talked about these reflexes and responses:

- Stop/withdraw
- Assess
- Attend to painful body part
- Analyse
- Avoid

Later on, we will talk about how brain remembers painful events and these memories will influence future decisions brain make, whether those decisions are conscious (after a process of thinking) or subconscious (without thinking).

Chronic Pain

The mechanisms causing chronic pain are different from those causing acute pain. Chronic pain is not a reliable feedback from your body. Your body has healed. as much as it can by about 12 weeks. Although the injured part of your body might not be as good as it was before it got injured, the chronic pain you are now feeling is out of proportion. Even though after 12 weeks your pain level continues to tell you that this part of your body needs more time to rest and heal, the injured part of your body is already as well as it is going to get.

People can experience ongoing chronic pain even when there has been no injury. For example, ongoing pain can occur after surgery or associated with other health conditions such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, endometriosis or irritable bowel syndrome. People with injured nerves, stroke or ongoing diabetes may experience neuropathic pain where the damaged nerves trigger or create erratic messages themselves.

In many cases there is no clear explanation for ongoing chronic pain. Regardless of whether a specific injury or illness has occurred, chronic pain indicates an unhelpful, overprotective process within the sensory nervous system. Changes occur in the brain, spinal cord and nerves, either changing nerve connections in the pathways or changing the way the nerves respond. So chronic pain is a fault of the pain system which is interfering with your recovery rather than helping it.

The abnormal activity or abnormal interpretation of nerve activity leads to an overreaction to otherwise 'normal' messages. For example, gentle touch can become a painful or unpleasant experience. And everyday movements and activities can trigger such an increase in pain that you avoid these activities, even though they don't cause any harm to the body. Even the thought of doing an activity causing pain can make the pain feel worse! Letting chronic pain decide what you do and don't do will not help you get better. Instead, these effects bring your body function down and your pain will get gradually worse as well.

When you have acute pain then listening to your body' works as a way of making sure the injured part of your body gets better. However, when you have chronic pain listening to your body' doesn't work because the messages you are getting. are abnormal. As a result, chronic pain is confusing and challenging.