

## Appendix 1. Patient Information Leaflet

### How to understand chronic pain

Pain is a universal experience, and often it is useful, protecting us from harm.

Pain is defined as “chronic” if it has been present for three months. Other ways of defining chronic pain are:

- that the pain continues, after healing would normally have been expected to have finished, or
- that the amount of pain felt, seems greater than the damage to the body.

Interestingly, there is no relationship between investigations (such as X-rays) and the actual symptom of pain. For example, in one research study 70% of volunteers, who had an MRI scan of the spine, were found to have some evidence of a slipped disc - but they did not have any pain at all!

In chronic pain, the problem is to do with the way that the brain is working. The nerves which sense pain are sending “danger signals” up to the brain, even when we’re touching them gently. The nerves which control movement are sending lots of “movement signals” down from the brain, to make the muscles tighten up, when they should not do so.

Also, the brain is not “processing” the pain signals correctly. This can be difficult to explain. Doctors believe that patients in this situation have **real pain**; it is not in any way imaginary, psychological or to do with “pain thresholds”. However because doctors cannot see or measure pain, there is sometimes a suspicion, about how much pain is really present.

When people are in pain, they think of the reason for the pain, and what to do about it. Options include trying to ignore it, going to the doctor, taking painkillers, or making sure that they don’t do anything to provoke the pain. Most of all they have thoughts like – “I wish it would go away”, “why is this happening to me” or “it’s not fair”. These are thoughts we can control, and actions we can take to help.

However, the part of our brain that causes a pain to be increased, and muscles tightened as described above, is **not** under our control. This area of the brain deals with emotions, attention, and sleep. When pain signals arrive in this part of the brain, all the alarms go off. The brain is directed to pay attention to the source of the pain, tightening muscles to prevent movement, and increasing how the nerves work, to detect any further danger.

We are not sure why this system gets out of control more in some people, than others. Emotional factors such as fear, anxiety, depression and anger are important, although they may not be the main cause. But we need to take these factors into account – especially if we consider that

- patients may be taking medication which is not helping much,
- they may have had worrying messages given to them at hospital clinics about “damage” or “degeneration”, or
- they may have been told that they are getting strong painkillers, and there is nothing else that can be done.

The emotions involved in chronic pain create a vicious cycle. If people feel sore, they feel sad, and sometimes cross, which encourages the brain to get ready for more “battles with pain” to come.

### Helpful organisations and websites

**Pain Concern.** Helpline: 0300 123 0789 [www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk) This hosts an online forum, and produces an internet radio programme called “Airing Pain”  
<http://www.painconcern.org.uk/category/airing-pain>

**Pain Association Scotland** [www.painassociation.com](http://www.painassociation.com) Pain Association Scotland has developed and delivers self-management training for people with chronic pain, via local meetings. The focus is to quickly build self-management skills, thereby creating practical, positive change - leading to an improved quality of life and well-being.

**Self Management booklet** <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/ChronicPain.asp>

**The Pain Tool Kit** [www.paintoolkit.org/](http://www.paintoolkit.org/)

**Pain Support** [www.painsupport.co.uk](http://www.painsupport.co.uk)

**PAIN CD** [www.paincd.org.uk](http://www.paincd.org.uk) – this is free advice, downloadable in audio format

**Alliance website** <http://www.myconditionmylife.org>

**Action on Pain** <http://www.action-on-pain.co.uk/> A chronic pain information site

**For neuropathic pain (this is pain caused by problems with the nerves themselves) ...**

<http://www.brainandspine.org.uk/neuropathic-pain>

<http://www.patient.co.uk/health/neuropathic-pain>