

How to deal with chronic pain (without pills) — the latest expert advice

A third of adults in the UK suffer from long-term pain. Peta Bee looks at the new science on how to help yourself



Dr Lafina Diamandis, who specialises in chronic pain relief
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Are you in pain? According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice), chronic pain, described by the NHS as pain that lasts longer than three months, afflicts more than one third (34 per cent) of adults in the UK. One report in the BMJ suggested that up to half of all GP appointments involve pain-related symptoms, with joint, back and headache issues among the most common problems.

If you are suffering you will know the debilitating effects all too well, although Dr Lafina Diamandis, a GP who specialises in helping people with chronic pain at her clinic, Deia Health, says that new evidence is emerging on how best to tackle the issue. Medication will only take you so far.

“Painkillers can play an important role by reducing the perception of pain signals in the body and brain,” Diamandis says. “NSAIDs [non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs] such as ibuprofen will block pain signals at the site of the injury, whereas others such as opioids act in the brain or spinal cord. They can be helpful in the early stages or acute flare-ups of pain. However, generally speaking, you should try to use them for the shortest time and lowest effective dose possible to avoid side-effects and overuse. Prolonged use of NSAIDs can cause stomach ulcers. Opiates such as codeine carry a risk of dependence and even continuous use

of medications such as paracetamol can cause ‘rebound symptoms’ [a worsening of original symptoms] when stopped after continuous long-term use — so it’s important that you consult with your doctor about the duration of treatment.”

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“Painkillers rarely address the root cause alone,” she adds. “We now know that a holistic approach is essential for pain management. A combination of therapies, rather than one single treatment, is important to address the lifestyle, physical and emotional aspects of pain relief.”

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Here’s the latest advice on pain relief:

Keep moving your body — it can be more beneficial than rest

Your instinct might be to rest when your body is in pain, but most research suggests that movement is far more therapeutic. Daniel Belavy, professor of musculoskeletal health and physiotherapy at Bochum University of Applied Sciences in Germany, says that exercise seems to improve a person’s pain sensitivity immediately and also raise their pain thresholds in the longer term.

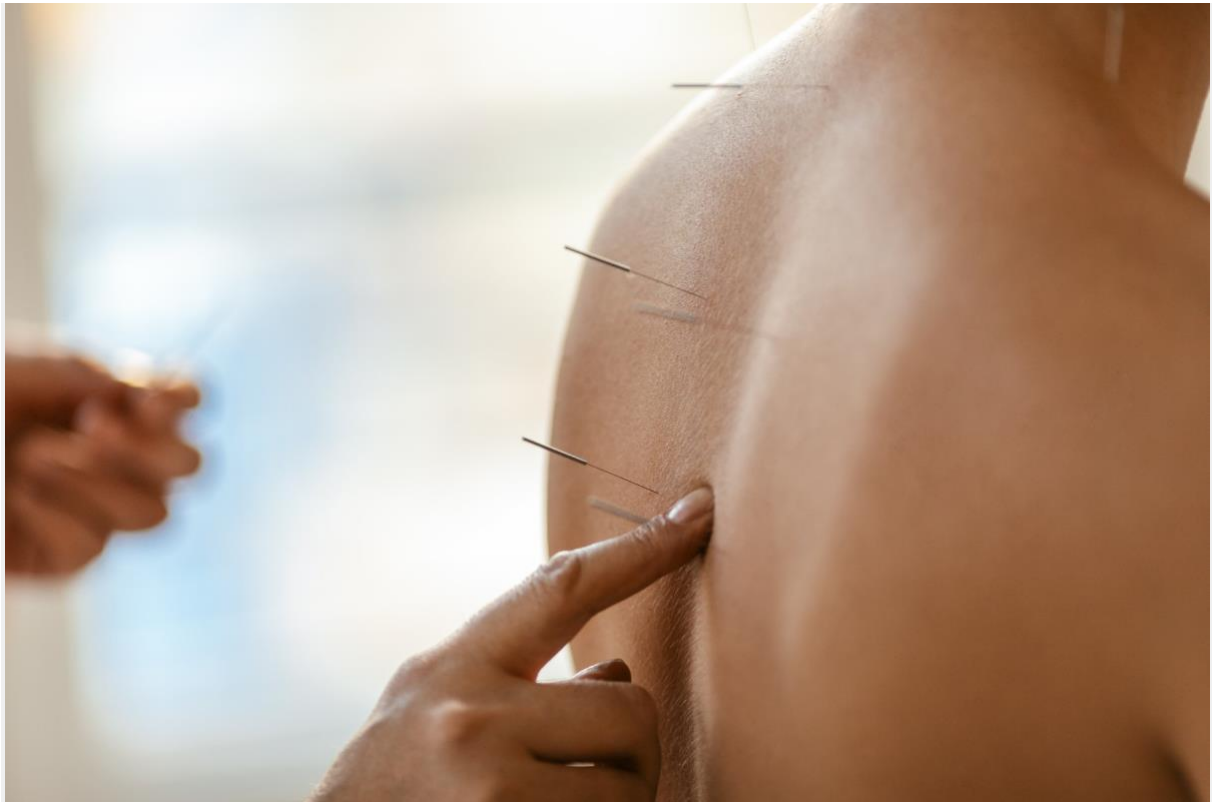
In a paper published in 2021, he and his colleagues showed that “exercise training was more effective than non-exercise interventions, such as pain education, massage and stress management for improving pain sensitivity” for some people. Finding the form of exercise that helps you is important — and can come down to trial and error.

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“For some people a gentle walk is ideal, others find that t’ai chi, yoga or other activities are helpful with pain relief,” Diamandis says. “Not every type of activity helps everyone.”

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Try a course of acupuncture



Studies show that acupuncture can produce pain-relieving endorphins

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The ancient practice of acupuncture or dry needling works by stimulating nerves beneath the skin and in the muscles and produces natural pain-relieving substances such as endorphins. It is recommended by the NHS and Nice for the treatment of chronic, long-term pain and is sometimes available on the NHS.

Plenty of studies show that it works. A 2017 National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) review of trials reported acupuncture to be more effective than control treatments for all pain conditions.

In a recent study conducted by a large team of researchers from the US, 800 adults with chronic low back pain (CLBP) were given acupuncture sessions for 12 weeks. Results in JAMA Network Open showed “that acupuncture needling is an effective treatment option for older adults with CLBP”. The NHS says you do need a full course, usually 5-8 sessions, of acupuncture as it can take several sessions for it to start working.

Don't have too much caffeine

Results of a study involving 3,797 people published in *Frontiers in Nutrition* this year suggested that people with chronic musculoskeletal pain “may benefit from reducing their caffeine intake” from all caffeine-containing products, while another recent paper from Peking Union Medical College warned that “heavy daily coffee drinkers may be more likely to have chronic pain” than non-coffee drinkers.

Diamandis says it is wise to restrict your caffeine intake and to consume no more than one to two cups of coffee a day if you experience chronic pain. “Caffeine increases the release of stress hormones and if you consume a lot of it your body will be permanently in a low-grade state of stress,” she says. “This has the effect of amplifying pain signals and switching off parts of the brain that reduce pain through positive emotions.” Too much caffeine might also interrupt your sleep. “That adversely impacts the nervous system repair cycle and increases pain-inducing inflammatory chemicals,” Diamandis says. “It is very wise to cut down.”

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Immerse yourself in nature — even five minutes can help

Spending time in nature provides a degree of escapism that can help with the management of chronic pain according to a recent study at the University of Plymouth. According to Alexander Smith, a researcher in the university's School of Psychology and the lead author of the paper in *The Journal of Pain*, being outside in large green spaces such as parks or forests helped to distract from pain. The participants in the study, all of whom suffered from CLBP, said that the tranquillity of trees and water helped to relieve the stress and anxiety caused by their pain.

- [Nature is good for you — if you concentrate](#)

“Our research showed that those able to get out into nature saw the benefits of doing so, both from a physical and a mental perspective,” Smith says. Even five minutes in greenery can make a difference.

“A gentle walk in a park or by a river has unlimited benefits,” Diamandis says. “It can help to rewire your brain in a positive way.”

Eat plenty of fatty fish and other healthy fats



Oily fish such as mackerel support your immune system and can help with pain relief

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Omega-3 fatty acids — found in oily fish such as salmon and mackerel, nuts, seeds and plant oils — are known to have potent anti-inflammatory and analgesic, or pain-relieving, properties. Increasing your intake of them could help with chronic pain relief. One Spanish study of 950 people in their sixties or older showed that the higher their oily fish consumption, the lower their incidence of pain over a five-year period. Results published in the journal *Clinical Nutrition* also showed that consuming more omega-3 fatty acids from any source helped to prevent pain from worsening.

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Conversely, scientists at the University of Texas reported in *Nature Metabolism* that a diet too high in omega-6 fats from processed snacks, fast foods, cakes and fatty and cured meats could exacerbate pain.

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“Fats from ultra-processed, high-fat foods can increase low-grade inflammation which has been linked to increased pain sensitivity in some inflammatory conditions,” says Rhiannon Lambert, a registered nutritionist and the author of *The Unprocessed Plate*. “But healthy fats from foods like oily fish, nuts, seeds and olive oil provide omega-3 and monounsaturated fats, which help to regulate inflammation and pain issues.”

Try CBT or mindfulness techniques

Pain is multifaceted and for many people there is an underlying emotional component that can make suffering worse. “Some mindfulness approaches help to break the loops of pain that become self-perpetuating,” Diamandis says. “They can effectively help to rewire your brain so that you deal with pain more effectively.”

Meditation is helpful for pain relief, she says, but so too are specific therapies. For a recent trial in *JAMA Network Open*, psychologists asked people who were taking strong painkillers for CLBP to undergo eight weeks of either cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), an approach that helps people to change thought and

behaviour patterns, or mindfulness sessions in which they were taught to notice any sensations they experienced to gain better control over how they responded to the pain. Both approaches led to “meaningful improvements” in pain tolerance with benefits lasting for up to 12 months.

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“These therapies aren’t a total cure,” says Eric Garland, professor of psychology and senior author of the study, “but they teach people how to develop the inner resources they need to cope with chronic pain and to live a better life.”

Add peppermint, turmeric, ginger and green tea to your diet



Turmeric contains curcumin, which has anti-inflammatory properties

Some foods have specific pain-busting properties, according to a review in the journal *Frontiers in Nutrition* last year. These include peppermint, turmeric, ginger and green tea, which researchers from the University of Sydney and other institutions suggest adding to a healthy diet.

“Benefits may be due to the bioactive compounds in these foods which have anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties,” they write. Sports medicine practitioners at the University of Miami suggested in *BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine* that turmeric is particularly potent in the relief of osteoarthritis pain of the knees.

In July a small study of 30 midlifers in the journal *Nutrients* with a history of joint and muscle pain showed that a daily 125mg supplement of ginger had some positive effects on perceptions of pain and inflammatory markers in participants. These ingredients won’t work on their own. “They need to be part of a healthy, anti-inflammatory and mostly plant-based diet,” Lambert says. “One that includes plenty of wholegrains, vegetables and fruit.”

Have a regular sauna

The heat of a sauna can have a soothing effect on pain. “The dry heat from a sauna actually decreases inflammation,” says Professor Setor Kunutsor, a cardiometabolic epidemiologist at the University of Leicester.

- **[Should we all be taking regular saunas?](#)**

In a study published in *Temperature* journal last year, Kunutsor showed that regular saunas may reduce severity of pain from musculoskeletal disorders while also improving mental wellbeing and sleep patterns that are often implicated in pain. He and his colleagues said that the beneficial effects “may be linked to their anti-inflammatory, cytoprotective and antioxidant properties”.

Others recently reported in *Rheumatology International* journal that saunas can bring temporary pain relief in conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis