

Managing persistent pain

More than 3.24 million, or one in five Australians live with chronic (also called persistent) pain.

Unlike the acute pain we experience when we cut a finger or pull a muscle, chronic or persistent pain is pain that lasts for more than three months, or beyond normal healing time. Chronic does not refer to the severity of the pain (although chronic pain can be extreme) but to the length of time the pain persists.

The origin of the pain may be able to be traced back to surgery, an acute injury or trauma such as a road accident, or connected to a disease or chronic condition like arthritis, osteoporosis, cancer or multiple sclerosis. But it can also exist without any clear reason. It might be instantly recognisable from an x-ray or scan or it may be invisible. This makes it challenging to diagnose and treat.

People with chronic pain often feel isolated and misunderstood, losing interest and enjoyment in normal activities. Loss of function and difficulties with personal relationships and employment are common. They experience higher than average rates of depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress and substance misuse.

Pain Australia research shows that pain is the most common reason people seek medical help, yet it remains one of the most neglected and misunderstood areas of healthcare.

A one-size-fits-all approach to pain management isn't considered to be particularly effective. Instead, healthcare providers like Castlemaine Health adopt a multi-disciplinary approach, as recommended by Chronic Pain Australia.

The pain management program at Castlemaine Health brings together the skills of a wide range of specialists including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dietitians, pharmacists and psychologists, all working side-by-side with patients' own doctors. The small group structure provides support and the opportunity to connect with others with

shared experience.

"People come to see us when they're no longer looking for a miracle cure. They want to know how to better manage their persistent pain," says Castlemaine Health physiotherapist Sue Ibbs.

"Persistent or chronic pain is physically and emotionally debilitating. We help people move on from looking at their life through the prism of their pain. To get to a stage where it's part of who they are, but it's not how they look at their whole life."

This shift of focus can be powerful.

"How people think and feel about their pain has a huge effect on how it impacts on their life," says occupational therapist Liz Denniston.

"It is possible to experience a better quality of life, happiness and joy again but that means learning how to navigate life in a new way, not just wait for the doctor to fix it."

"Fear of pain is often more debilitating than the experience of the pain itself," she says.

"When people are able to better understand their pain and change their attitude to it, it is possible to reduce their suffering."

Self-management plays a huge role in the program.

Evidence shows that patients who embrace active self-management strategies achieve better outcomes than those who rely on passive strategies like medication.

Participants learn techniques including mindfulness meditation and exercise so they can take control of their pain and hopefully return to the activities they enjoy.

The six-week pain management program at Castlemaine Health begins with a comprehensive assessment where participants also talk through their goals, which could be as simple as sitting through a movie or as significant as returning to work.

Liz says that people who enter the program have often reached a point where they've decided it's just easier to stay at



Castlemaine Health occupational therapist Liz Denniston and physiotherapist Sue Ibbs.

home than risk the chance of a flare up, or they're stuck thinking "I can't be happy until I can....". The program encourages them to set shorter, more achievable goals.

"There's our ideal and then there's the reality of our life," says Sue. "And this applies to everyone, whether we're dealing with persistent pain or the realities of ageing. We find the closer we can bring these two together, the more content people are."

"A person's pain journey is like a big puzzle."

"It's our role to make them aware of all the pieces, but they're the ones who put the puzzle together and find their way."

If you or someone you know is experiencing chronic or persistent pain you should speak with your doctor or contact the Community Rehabilitation Centre at Castlemaine Health.

If you or someone you know is suffering from a chronic pain speak to your GP about the pain management program or contact the Community Rehabilitation Centre at Castlemaine Health on 5471 3575 for more information.



Q&A

- Q:** What is chronic or persistent pain?
- A:** The definition is pain that lasts beyond the time expected for healing following surgery, trauma or other condition, usually more than three months. But it can also exist without a clear reason.
- Q:** Who should I speak to about my persistent pain?
- A:** Your doctor is the best person to speak to. Depending on their assessment they may refer you to a pain management program like the one at Castlemaine Health.