



Learn about pain

What is pain?

Pain is a protection system to keep us safe. It's how our brain signals to our body that there is potential danger. Pain makes us act in a way that protects us from further harm.

Everyone experiences pain differently. You may feel throbbing, aching, stabbing, burning, cramping or shooting pain.

Pain is a complex condition that's influenced by many different factors. But regardless of the cause, the pain is always real.

Research suggests that learning about persistent (chronic) pelvic pain can lead to a gradual reduction in pain. It can help you understand your pain and find ways to manage it better.

The pain response

Your brain produces pain when it interprets that you are in danger and need protection. When there is potential danger to your tissues (e.g. when you touch something hot), special nerves send messages through your spinal cord to your brain. Your brain interprets these messages, which results in a pain response (i.e. you feel pain).

Why does some pain become persistent?

Persistent pain happens when your nervous system becomes overprotective.

When danger messages are repeatedly sent to your spinal cord, it 'increases the volume' of these messages before sending them to the brain. When your brain receives these louder messages, it's more likely to produce pain.

Once your nervous system becomes overprotective, anything can set it off – even thoughts.

Persistent pain is more likely to be related to the increased sensitivity of your nervous system, rather than an injury or condition getting worse.

How your thoughts influence your pain

Your thoughts can impact your pain experience.

When you anticipate pain, it can increase the pain response. This can lead to higher levels of stress and anxiety, which may make the pain worse. Over time, this vicious cycle can make it harder to cope.

You can try different things to change your thoughts about your pain. For example, you can remind yourself that pain flares do not necessarily mean your condition is getting worse, and you can try to move normally.

When you continue with activities you enjoy, your body releases feel-good chemicals (endorphins). These can improve your mood and reduce your body's response to pain.

You can retrain your brain

Your brain can constantly adapt to changes in your body and environment. With persistent pelvic pain, if you repeat certain thoughts, feelings and behaviour, it can lead to a more sensitive nervous system. This can make your pain worse.

But you can retrain your brain to reduce your pain. For example, you can try different activities, such as meditation and yoga, or see a psychologist to learn how to manage your thoughts about pain. A pelvic floor physiotherapist can also help you learn more about your pain.

You don't have to do this alone. Work with your healthcare team to develop a plan that's right for you.

Retraining your brain takes time and practice. But when you use these skills regularly in your daily life, you will notice improvements in how you experience pain.

When to see your doctor

If you have persistent pelvic pain, it's important to see your doctor. It can take some time to diagnose. It might also take time to learn how to manage it, with help from your healthcare team.

For more information, resources and references visit jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/persistent-pelvic-pain



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Disclaimer: This information does not replace medical advice. If you are worried about your health, talk to your doctor or healthcare team.

We write health information for people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and identities. We use the term 'women', but we acknowledge that this term is not inclusive of all people who may use our content.

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