Understanding Chronic Pain

Most of us think of pain as a result of an injury or disease. We expect it will go away once we have medical treatment or the injury heals. For many people, this is the case. However for others, the pain doesn’t go away. In some cases, you can have pain even without an injury or obvious body damage. This ongoing type of pain is called chronic pain. It is estimated that one in three Australians live with chronic pain.

Acute or chronic pain – what’s the difference?

Acute pain is usually short-term. It tends to be more associated with damage to the body, and will usually go away after healing. Acute pain is a very important alarm system – it alerts us that some action is needed.

Chronic pain lasts longer, beyond the time you would expect an injury to heal. Chronic pain often does not indicate ongoing damage in our body – it’s like the alarm has been left on and someone’s turned the volume up. The pain is less to do with an injury to body tissue and more to do with what’s happening in our nervous system. Our nervous system can become sensitised and overactive, so that we continue to feel pain, even without any ongoing tissue damage.

Everyone’s experience of pain is different. Two people with the same injury, such as a sprained ankle, can have a very different pain experience.

This is because pain is complex – how we perceive pain involves an interaction between our mind and our body. This interaction involves the nervous system and other factors, such as genetics, culture, thoughts, previous pain experiences, stress and what was happening in our lives when the pain started.

Because chronic pain is complex, there is no ‘one size fits all’ way of treating it. To be successful pain managers, we may have to use a combination of things such as medications, exercise, diet, relaxation, thinking strategies and more. Over time, you can turn down the volume of your pain.

More information to help you understand pain is available on the National Pain Week website.

www.nationalpainweek.org.au