



## ASK THE EXPERT

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# WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN?

Everyone experiences occasional aches and pains. In fact, sudden pain is an important reaction of the nervous system that helps alert you to possible injury – it is a protective mechanism. When an injury occurs, pain signals travel from the injured area, up your spinal cord, and to your brain. It is a simple reaction.

However, chronic pain is more complex with involvement of psychosocial factors and multiple biological issues. As human beings, all of us, and sometimes even doctors, forget the difference between acute and chronic pain.

These are 2 entirely different concepts. Acute pain is something you experience on a daily basis. Examples would be when you put a finger on a hot stove, somebody puts their foot on your toe, you unconsciously hit your elbow, you have a kidney stone, or give birth. Acute pain means that there is something wrong with your



body and it needs to be corrected. But chronic pain is long-lasting. It continues after normal healing has occurred or should have occurred. Occasionally chronic pain becomes a disease in itself. In chronic pain, pain signals travel from the painful area up the spinal cord and the brain as in acute pain. However, there are multiple factors amplifying this pain. For these reasons, many patients develop allodynia (experience of pain from stimuli

that isn't normally painful) and hyperalgesia (experience of an enhanced sensitivity to pain).

Generally, we believe that chronic or persistent pain is pain lasting for 6 months or longer that does not respond to traditional medical or surgical treatment. Some even believe it to be just 3 months. Please remember, chronic pain may be there and you may still have acute episodes in the same region or acute pain that is unrelated to your chronic pain. ■



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