

Why Does it Hurt?

Pain was once thought to be a very basic sense; something damaged you and you would feel pain. We now know that pain is a very complicated response to things that happen in your body and mind.

What is pain?

Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage (International Association for the Study of Pain). When you feel pain, it is always real, no matter what is causing it.

What causes pain?

Pain is your brain's best guess at what you need to feel in order to protect your body. You have nerves in your body designed to identify if there is something wrong and these nerves will send a small electrical signal to your brain. Your brain analyses this signal and all sorts of information such as memories, beliefs, emotions, your current level of danger and what you see hear and smell in your environment. Your brain will then decide whether there is actual or the potential for tissue damage. Having pain for a few weeks after an injury is normal, it's the way your body protects itself from further injury. If you are still experiencing significant pain once your injury has healed, we say this is persistent pain. Usually we would expect things to heal between a couple of weeks and a couple of months, so anything beyond that we would say it is persisting.

What makes pain persist?

Your body and brain have evolved to protect itself at all costs. We know that after a few months of pain persisting, your body will become more efficient at producing pain, which in other words is your body becoming more sensitive to pain! Cells in your spinal cord and brain change to become more responsive, this gives you an increased 'buffer' between when you feel pain and when tissue damage will occur.

Not everything you perceive is real and exactly what you think it is. Think of visual illusions, even though you know they are an illusion, your brain will show you what it thinks is most beneficial. The same thing can happen with pain; regardless of what your body is sensing, your mind can change that if it thinks it will be beneficial. If you are fearful or worried about using a body part after an injury, that can make the pain worse because your brain will take these emotions into account when deciding if it is in danger.

What should I do if I have persistent pain?

There are many ways to treat persistent pain and it's all to do with re-training your pain system. The more you understand about how pain works, the more you will understand that pain and injury are often quite different things. The good news is, you've already made a start at learning

Chronic pain is the same as persistent pain - it's pain that lasts a long time. We choose to use the term persistent pain because it is accurate and invokes less fear.

how pain works and what to do about it. Once you understand how pain works, you can start to do a little more than you normally do and gradually build up. Movement and activity is a great way to gradually re-train your pain system and modify how your brain responds to what you do. There are different ways to build up and our Physiotherapists can help you do that. Initially it's a good idea to focus more on the things you can do and try not to focus too much attention to your pain. Trusting that your body can adapt and get used to activities if you give it time is a great mindset to have. Through your journey with persistent pain there will almost certainly be ups and downs and it's important to remember that the pain is protecting you, not telling you that you have damaged yourself.

Sometimes it's useful to discuss things that have affected you in the past because memories and emotions can sometimes be enough to trigger your pain system. It's important to be aware of this so that you know that when your pain flares up, it isn't necessarily because of damage to the system. Having pain like this is quite common and doesn't make it any less real, it still just means that you need to re-train your pain system to be less reactive.