



AUSTRALIAN PAIN MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

Living with chronic pain: the emergency department



Flare-ups are unsettling

You may have found flare-up pain is a fact of life when living with chronic pain.

A flare-up may take you by surprise, and occur without warning or trigger.

When the pain flares, it can be unsettling or worrying when you are already trying to control your everyday chronic pain.

What is a pain flare-up?

A chronic pain flare-up is an episode of chronic pain that is more intense than usual. Some people describe the flare-up pain as feeling like muscle cramps or spasms, electric shock or shooting pain, for example.

The level of flare-up pain on a scale of 0 to 10 will vary and only you will know its intensity.

Chronic pain flare-ups can commonly last from a minute to a number of hours.

You may also find the flare-ups vary in intensity and duration at different times.

What causes flare-up pain?

There is no standard cause. Different things can trigger flare-ups for different people. Sometimes it just happens without a particular reason.

At other times, you may have flare-ups because of changes to your lifestyle such as after lying down or sitting for longer periods of time, or more physical activity than usual. Sometimes even simple acts like walking to the bathroom or getting dressed can trigger a flare-up if you are debilitated.

What does the emergency department do?

Hospital emergency departments (ED) are open 24 hours a day to treat the acutely ill and seriously injured people whose condition could quickly deteriorate or be life threatening, if not treated early.

The ED triages patients, which means that nurses take a patient history and find out how sick each patient is. This saves doctors time and enables them to see patients with the greatest medical need first, so as to limit complications, and save lives.



Patients with chronic pain may have to wait quite a while at the ED because chronic pain is a chronic condition, meaning it is ongoing and there isn't a cure that is readily available. The clinicians in ED are very skilled at treating acute pain and will be looking for the cause to treat. Acute pain is the body's signal that something else is going wrong. However, with chronic pain there is unlikely to be a cause to treat, and flare-ups generally settle down if you give them time.

Will the emergency department help me?

The ED will treat all patients that attend. However, people with chronic pain need to weigh up whether their pain is a medical emergency. Medication is not always a component of treatment.

What if it is not an emergency?

It is likely to take a long time to get treated and ED waiting rooms are generally uncomfortable places to be. The best alternatives to the ED are your GP, nurse practitioner, or after hours medical centre. It is best to develop a relationship with your treating health professional so you feel safe and have a trusted professional to help you get through this tough time.

Changes in symptoms

It is wise to attend the ED if you notice any **serious changes or symptoms**. For example:

- Urinary and bowel incontinence
- Newly developed or sudden worsening of weakness and paralysis of the leg(s)
- Newly developed major loss of sensation of the legs
- Significant flare ups after a major injury such as road traffic accidents (if GP is not available)

My flare-up Plan

Planning in advance for flare-ups can really reduce your distress.

- Have some reassuring expressions at hand such as, 'this won't last forever, it never does';
- Practise deep breathing and relaxation many times – tense muscles worsen pain;
- Organize items of comfort
- Take any analgesia as prescribed
- Resting a lot may not help. Many people find that gentle physical activity improves the pain

Other things that can help

Choose the techniques that work best for you

- Recognise a flare-up is happening and stay calm
- Peer support; e.g. call Pain Link 1300 340 357
- Talk to friends
- Manage your anger; e.g. thump a cushion
- Meditate
- Be kind to yourself and make yourself comfortable
- Continue with some daily activity
- Gentle mobilising exercises
- Use relaxation e.g. visualisation techniques
- Turn on distracting music or a movie
- Use heat/cold pack
- Turn on TENS machine
- Soothing massage
- Don't panic, the pain lessens given time
- Take analgesia (as prescribed)



Sources

London Pain Clinic website 2016 <http://www.londonpainclinic.com/resources/coping-with-flare-ups-and-chronic-pain/>

New South Wales Government Health Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, Visiting an emergency department
http://www.islhd.health.nsw.gov.au/Emergency_Information/visiting_emergency.asp

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