

# Understanding chronic pain

Health Canada estimates that one-quarter of Canadians aged 15 or older live with chronic pain, a condition that affects physical and mental health and inhibits work, relationships, and overall quality of life.

The World Health Organization recognizes chronic pain (i.e., chronic pain that lasts more than three months) as a disease in itself and not just a symptom of another condition. It can occur without a known cause, after an injury has healed, or after a medical condition has been treated.

Workers in the trades are disproportionately impacted by chronic pain.

## Explain dangers

Chronic pain is linked to other medical conditions, such as headaches, arthritis, cancer, nerve pain, back pain, and fibromyalgia.

People who experience pain often feel isolated. This can create barriers to health care access and deter a worker from seeking treatment.

Chronic pain often coincides with increased absenteeism, decreased job performance, concentration problems, physical limitations, impatience toward coworkers and customers, and problematic substance use. Workers might go to great lengths to conceal chronic pain. Therefore, it can be hard to spot in the workplace.

A person with chronic pain can experience fluctuating symptoms and might not experience pain every day.

## Identify controls

Workers should not self-manage their chronic pain. Instead, they should work with their health care provider to find a safe treatment plan.

Treating chronic pain with medication can be one effective part of an overall pain management plan that is developed with their primary health care provider.

Chronic pain treatment goals may include pain reduction, as well as improvements in cognitive health, psychological health, social function, or physical function.

## Demonstrate

- Model compassion. The Canadian Mental Health Association says that we can practice compassion by expressing genuine interest and concern, actively listening without judgement, and validating others' experiences and emotions. Doing so on a regular basis is vital for forming meaningful support networks at work.
- Remember that chronic pain is a disease and requires medical treatment.
- Encourage workers to learn more about pain and pain management by sharing credible resources.
- Watch *The Guardian's* YouTube video titled "What is chronic pain and how does it work?" with your crew.
- Review resources on The Power Over Pain Portal (at [portal.powerovepain.ca](http://portal.powerovepain.ca)) and recommend the website to your workers.