

Aches and pains

As one reaches the silver years, the 'growing pains' of adolescence become the 'growing (older) pains' of age. Learn how to identify serious causes of chronic pain so you can seek timely medical attention **By Bella Lim**

IN CONSULTATION WITH **DR LEE JER EN**, SENIOR CONSULTANT, GERIATRIC MEDICINE

French poet Pierre-Jean de Béranger wrote:

“Old age doth in sharp pains abound”,

a pithy description of the common aches felt in one’s senior years. According to Dr Lee Jer En, Senior Consultant, Geriatric Medicine, JurongHealth, chronic pain – or persistent pain that lasts at least three months – is a complaint that is common in the elderly. He noted that a 2009 survey on chronic pain in Singaporeans found that incidence of chronic pain in patients older than 65 years old was almost 20 per cent compared to about 9 per cent in the general population. Some aches and pains are part of the ageing process, but some are signs telling you to pay attention to your body and pace yourself.

Chronic age-related pain

Chronic pain is more common in an older person for many reasons. There is greater wear and tear on muscles, making older adults more vulnerable to aches and pains. Stiffer muscles and joints also result in limited flexibility and range of movement. This means even people who are more active in their senior years and participate in a variety of sports and exercise regularly can experience an occasional bout of muscle soreness. Being less limber also means bones, joints, ligaments and muscles are at greater risk of injury. Another reason for greater incidence of chronic pain in older people is the conditions that cause such pain which become more common as we age. These include:

- **Osteoporosis or brittle bone disease** that can cause fractures in the spine, hips, ankles, wrist and elsewhere
- **Arthritis or joint inflammation** that affects the knees, hands, elbows and other bony joints, making it hard to move. The pain is usually worse in the morning
- **Post-herpetic neuralgia**, a painful, chronic condition that can occur after shingles. Typically, the site where the shingles occurred feels a burning, sharp and jabbing, or a deep and aching pain
- **Nerve damage** due to poorly controlled diabetes (called diabetic neuropathy)
- **Trigeminal neuralgia** or an intense pain in the face due to a disorder of the trigeminal nerve, which carries feeling from the face to the brain

Another reason for more reports of pain in old age is that progress in medicine has resulted in longer lifespans so the long-term complications of chronic conditions, including pain, are more prone to occur. Older people today are also more likely to undergo surgeries for age-related problems and suffer post-operative pain. In addition, older people feel pain differently. “Physiological studies suggest that pain tolerance is reduced in an older person,” said Dr Lee, “And when the pain does set in, pain becomes less bearable in the older person.”



While it is common for an older person to accept pain as part of normal ageing, chronic pain can be a sign of serious underlying medical problems and should not be neglected.

“There is a chance of missing serious underlying medical conditions if treatment is delayed,” said Dr Lee.

If you or your loved one experiences any of these signs in addition to unexplained pain, do see a doctor:

- **Unexplained weight loss or loss of appetite**
- **Fever**
- **Pain that is worse at rest**
- **Pain that is associated with weakness and numbness**
- **Inability to pass urine**
- **A past history of cancer**

Even if there are no serious consequences, chronic pain can significantly affect the quality of life. Any pain that results in conditions such as insomnia, depression or makes you or your loved one unable to carry out daily activities should be addressed. Ideally, the management of chronic pain should combine multi-disciplinary approaches. Apart from prescribed medication, do also consider adopting lifestyle changes and good habits. For instance, getting enough sleep, light exercise and a little weight loss can actually go a long way to ease chronic pain.

Home remedies for pain

Try some of these drug-free remedies to counteract pain if it strikes.

Deep breathing Deep breathing releases mood enhancing hormones called endorphins that block pain signals.

Light exercise Gentle stretching of affected joints (through yoga or taichi) or light activity (walking) also release endorphins. In addition, these activities promote blood circulation and nourish damaged nerves.

Heat it up or chill it down Both heat or cold therapy stimulate the body to heal. Heat dilates blood vessels, increases blood circulation and reduces muscle spasms. Cold compresses, on the other hand, reduce swelling by constricting blood vessels and can numb pain. Try heat or ice packs at least twice a day and see which one offers the best relief from pain and stiffness.

Distraction mode Take your mind off your pain by doing something else; read a book, do a puzzle or watch a movie.

Eat your cure Traditional herbal treatments may prove helpful in easing pain. Some foods known to alleviate pain include ginger, turmeric and mint. Brew a hot ginger or mint tea or add a little turmeric to your meals.

.....

Before you take a painkiller, seek medical advice, especially if you are on other medications. Be aware of taking health supplements such as glucosamine, vitamin D, vitamin B-complex or calcium without a doctor's advice. There is no evidence that these supplements are effective in relieving chronic pain for those with a balanced diet and who are not vitamin-deficient.

Before you pop a pill...

