Nondrug Treatments for Chronic Pain Management
THOMAS SELLS, of Culver City, Calif., first injured his back carrying heavy packs as a combat soldier in the Vietnam War. “By 2009, my low-back pain had become so bad I could barely walk,” he says. “My surgical prognosis wasn’t great, but that was beginning to look like my only option.”

That’s when staffers at the local Veteran’s Affairs (VA) facility persuaded him to join a twice-weekly class in tai chi. “Three months in, I started to get more fluid and had far less pain,” says Sells. “I carried myself differently and began to view obstacles differently. I became calmer and less stressed.”

Sells has studied with a grandmaster practitioner of tai chi and leads classes. Most days he describes his pain as mild to nonexistent. He’s added other exercises to his routine, including Zumba classes and hiking, but credits tai chi as the core element of his recovery.

“It’s given me back my life,” says Sells. It used to be that those treatments were considered fringe, but no more. Growing research shows that a combination of hands-on therapies and other nondrug measures can be just as effective as more traditional forms of back care, including drugs and surgery. And they’re much safer. And, you avoid the risks of overdose and addiction that come along with opioid medications.

A key to success in alternative pain methods is focusing on the whole person. Conventional treatment often fails because “it focuses on individual symptoms and broken parts,” says Donald Levy, M.D., medical director of the Osher Clinical Center for Integrative Medicine at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Chestnut Hill, Mass.

Instead, he says, doctors “should be thinking about treating the whole patient—helping people get stronger, which will not only speed recovery but also help prevent future episodes of pain.”

Choosing a Treatment

There’s no one approach to pain management that will work for everyone, says Nancy Ann Cotter, M.D., Physician Lead for Integrative Medicine for the VA New Jersey Health Care System and a clinical champion with the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation for the VA. Patient preference, goals, living situations, and relationships all play a part. In considering their treatment goals, “patients should ask what is ultimately most important to me? What do I enjoy doing the most?,” says Cotter.

You’ll probably find several approaches that will work together to help you manage pain. Cotter says patients find not just comfort but empowerment in knowing that there are nondrug options to help them handle pain.

There are short and long-acting approaches to pain relief, Cotter says. Those in severe pain might benefit from short-term or bridge therapies provided by experts that help kick-start self-healing mechanisms.

While short-term therapies can have a fast effect, there are other approaches related to self-care and lifestyle changes that have a longer-term benefit. “You give someone an acupuncture treatment, you know they feel better for a day or a week, hopefully a week,” says Cotter, “But teach them how to help themselves and change their habits, they’ll feel better for a lifetime.”

Pain And Your Overall Health

You and your healthcare provider can work together to understand what’s important to you and develop a plan specific to your chronic pain. The VA has developed these topics that help define “whole health” centered on the patient.

➤ Look at the big picture: Identify areas in your life that are affecting your health. The big picture is more than lab tests or blood pressure numbers: It’s how you sleep, what you eat, if you’re able to exercise, who shares your life. It’s also considering current stressors in your life. For instance, if you are going through a divorce or having financial troubles. All of these factors can affect your health.

➤ Have a conversation: Talk to your doctor about your history, your feelings, and what’s most important to both you and your family or loved ones.

➤ Set your goal: Consider what’s personal to you: Perhaps it’s walking to the mailbox or dancing at your daughter’s wedding, or another goal that’s important to you.

➤ Create a health plan: Find the approaches you’d like to try that will help you reach your goal. Always wondered about acupuncture? Do you love to move and want to aim for yoga or running? Do you prefer the idea of taking a tranquil walk in the woods and maybe meditating?

➤ Find your community: Whatever approach you choose, try to find other people who have similar interests. It might be someone at home, at the gym, at work, or even online.

Source: VA Patient-Centered Care material available at: va.gov/PATIENTCENTEREDCARE/explore/about-whole-health.asp
Short-Term Therapies Worth a Try

Acupuncture
In Eastern thought, it’s believed that inserting thin needles at specific points on the body helps correct imbalances in qi, the flow of energy. From a Western perspective, acupuncture is believed to affect soft tissue and nerves in ways that lessen pain. For example, it may activate nerves to interrupt pain signals as they travel through the spinal cord to the brain.

**Good to Know:** Make sure the acupuncturist is licensed in your state. To find a provider, consult the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. Therapy shouldn’t be painful, but you might feel a slight pinch when a practitioner inserts the needles. Acupuncture is safe as long as you’re in the hands of a trained and licensed practitioner who uses sterile needles.

Chiropractic Care
This hands-on therapy, in which a person’s spine and other parts of the body are manipulated to alleviate pain and promote healing, dates back to ancient China and Greece. Modern chiropractors perform “adjustments,” which use a strong, controlled force to manipulate the spine or joints to improve alignment and restore mobility. There’s good evidence that chiropractic care helps alleviate lower back pain, including some suggestions that it works as well as medication. A 2010 comprehensive review found that the therapy may be helpful with joint, neck, and shoulder pain, and tension headaches. In a 2011 online survey of more than 45,000 Consumer Reports subscribers, 65 percent of those who had chiropractic care said it helped.

**Good to Know:** There are different types of providers who are qualified to practice. Those who are licensed chiropractors earn a four-year degree. Physicians with a degree in osteopathic medicine—indicated by a “D.O.” rather than an “M.D.” after their name—usually focus on primary care and have additional training in the musculoskeletal system. Some doctors of osteopathic medicine offer spinal manipulation (a back treatment that uses controlled forces—sometimes mild, sometimes firm—to adjust the spine and allow it to move more easily).

Massage
Massage relaxes tense muscles and increases blood flow to injured areas. It also triggers the release of endorphins, feel-good hormones that decrease stress and anxiety associated with pain. It dates back to the Ancient Egyptians and Chinese. There are different kinds: Swedish massage employs long strokes and kneading movements, and deep tissue massage uses focused, intense pressure on tight or painful areas. Research suggests that in addition to pain relief, massage may help ease depression. A few studies have shown that massage helps alleviate headaches and muscle or joint pain in the back, hip, knees, and neck.

**Good to Know:** Before trying it, confirm with your doctor that it won’t be harmful for your condition. Massage isn’t appropriate for everyone. People taking blood thinners, such as warfarin (Coumadin or generic), for example, should avoid deep tissue massage because intense pressure could cause bruising.

Look for a therapist licensed by your state who specializes in sports medicine or who has experience with your type of pain. A massage shouldn’t make you wince, so make sure that you communicate when the pressure feels good or is too intense. Researchers in one study recommended a weekly 60-minute session with a licensed massage therapist certified by a national organization, such as the American Massage Therapy Association.

Physical Therapy (PT)
Physical therapy focuses on improving your ability to do your daily activities and teaches you how to prevent future problems. Treatments vary, but most combine strengthening and stretching with passive care such as massaging muscles and moving joints within their range of motion. A physical therapist can help develop and supervise a sustainable, personalized long-term exercise program.

Multiple studies have shown that physical therapy can help relieve joint pain as well as chronic lower back and neck pain when it includes an exercise component.

**Good to Know:** Therapy should be challenging. Once something becomes easy, the therapist should add weight, repetitions, or new exercises.
Lifestyle Practices That Can Ease Pain

Biofeedback
The theory in this approach is that you can control pain by using such techniques as deep breathing or muscle relaxation to consciously control or monitor otherwise involuntary bodily functions such as heart rate, skin temperature, muscle tension, or blood pressure.

**Good to Know:** Some experts think it might help people by simply teaching them how to relax, though it may not work for everyone. And several large reviews have found it works best for conditions sometimes brought on by stress, such as backaches, migraines, and tension headaches. One advantage is that biofeedback is generally free of risks and side effects.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
This form of psychological counseling, or talk therapy—combined with behavioral changes—helps improve function in those living with chronic pain by teaching coping and relaxation skills. Most important is instruction on how to short-circuit negative thoughts, which can intensify pain sensations. Negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and fear stimulate chemicals in the brain involved in pain perception, so reducing them not only helps you feel better mentally but also helps you hurt less.

With CBT, you learn to identify negative thoughts and behavior linked to your pain and develop ways to change them. For example, you might be fearful that activity will worsen your condition. A therapist can encourage you to question that idea and find ways to start moving again. With time, you “develop the sense that pain is manageable,” says Robert Kerns, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry, neurology, and psychology at Yale University.

**Good to Know:** Several large studies show that CBT can help prevent migraines and neck pain, and ease chronic low back pain. Cognitive behavioral therapy usually involves seven to 12 sessions, Kerns says.

Exercise
Walking, running, swimming, bike riding, working with weights can help. Numerous studies underscore the usefulness of exercise programs for different kinds of pain. Diverse exercise approaches have been proven effective for low back pain; strength training and aerobic exercise have been proven effective for knee and hip osteoarthritis; and a program of gradually increased exercise has helped with fibromyalgia. Programs can vary by intensity, frequency, length, and setting. Complementary methods such as Yoga or Tai Chi often overlap with the principles and practices of exercise.

Easing pain through exercise is not as simple as doing a few stretches or taking an occasional walk. Exercise programs associated with better outcomes usually are supervised, intensive, and combined with cognitive behavioral therapy or education.

**Good to Know:** Work with your healthcare provider to identify the type of exercise program and resources that could be tailored to your individual needs and interests. Whatever method you choose, regular practice and persistence will bring best results.

How Mind And Body Interact
Stress and tension can worsen pain, says Benjamin Kligler, M.D., national director of the Integrative Health Coordinating Center at the VA. “Any practice such as yoga or tai chi that induces relaxation and gives you some mental distance from physical problems can help with pain.

Up to half of people enduring pain for three months or longer also suffer from depression or another mood disorder, research suggests.

That’s partly because pain may stem from a physical cause, like a fall, “but it’s perceived in the brain. And the parts of the brain involved in perceiving pain also regulate mood,” says Robert Kerns, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry, neurology, and psychology at Yale University. That means that pain can amplify—or even cause—depression and anxiety, and vice versa.

“When pain is present, doctors are trained to look for a physical cause,” Kerns says. “But if you have chronic pain, your doctor should also ask questions to get at how it’s affecting you emotionally.” So don’t be afraid or embarrassed to speak up if you’re also experiencing depressive symptoms, including fatigue, anxiety, or problems with sleeping or eating.

The promising news is that certain treatments—notably mindfulness, meditation, relaxation, and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)—can improve function in those suffering from chronic back pain and offer hope for other conditions.
Meditation
Meditation can be undertaken in many ways, but it’s all about the ability to focus, and focusing may help reduce the feeling of pain. Common elements might include: a quiet location, a comfortable posture, focused attention (on a special word or set of words, an object, or the act of breathing) and an open attitude.

**Good to Know:** Yoga studios, YMCAs, or community groups may help identify teachers in your area. Inquire about the training and experience of instructors and about fees involved.

Good intensity, as well as lowering pain interference in areas including sleep and mood.

**Good to Know:** The University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness, Health Care, and Society offers a tool to locate a certified MBSR teacher: www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-based-programs/mbsr-courses/find-an-mbsr-program/.

Nutrition
Eating healthy can help keep off excess weight, and keep away the pain related to carrying extra pounds. “It’s becoming more popular to include a healthy diet as a mainstay of a pain management program,” says Cotter.

Researchers are increasingly investigating the link between pain, inflammation, and diet, and whether the standard American diet contributes to inflammation and to bodily responses like pain because it lacks adequate fiber and plant-based foods and contains too much simple sugar.

**Good to Know:** Some pain conditions, such as migraines, can be exacerbated by foods we eat. Cotter says experts now find links between irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and certain foods.

Mindfulness
Mindfulness, sometimes called awareness, is an approach to life that can help reduce stress and diminish pain. There are different paths to mindfulness, and the teachings all center on an “intention to be more aware and engaged in the present moment,” according to the VA.

Learning mindfulness helps individuals regulate their attention on immediate experiences and focus on the present moment by being curious, open and accepting. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) incorporates meditation, breathing, and yoga.

Research has shown that MBSR has a potential positive impact on pain (particularly chronic back pain), anxiety, and aspects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. A 2016 study found that Veterans who practiced a form of mindfulness called Integrative Restoration Yoga Nidra (iRest) reported a 23 to 42 percent reduction in pain intensity, as well as lowering pain interference in areas including sleep and mood.

**Good to Know:** The University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness, Health Care, and Society offers a tool to locate a certified MBSR teacher: www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-based-programs/mbsr-courses/find-an-mbsr-program/.

Tai Chi
This is another mind and body practice that combines slow, gentle movements with deep breathing and mental focus. Tai chi is sometimes called “moving meditation” and the mindfulness aspects are also key to deriving benefits. You are encouraged to focus on your breathing and visualize the movement of energy or “chi” through your body. American College of Physicians’ guidelines suggest that this ancient Chinese martial art can be an effective defense against back pain.

**Good to Know:** You can find certified instructors through the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association. If you’d like to get an idea of what to expect, check out this introductory video about tai chi and qigong (a similar martial art) posted by the National Institutes of Health.

Yoga
This mind and body practice encourages a quieting of the mind that allows you to focus on movements or postures, which can ease stress and provide mental distance from your pain. These exercises develop strength and improve balance and flexibility. Guidelines from the American College of Physicians (ACP) suggest that trying yoga for back pain is a good move.

**Good to Know:** Especially when first starting, look for classes with words like “gentle,” relaxation,” or “restorative” in their title, and steer clear of those that have words like “power” or “Ashtanga”—two styles that are more vigorous in their description. Get your doctor’s okay before starting a yoga program and seek out knowledgeable teachers through sources such as the nonprofit Yoga Alliance, which requires that teachers have at least 200 hours of training for its certification, or International Association of Yoga Therapists.
Home Remedies for Quick Relief

**Muscle-Pain Creams and Patches**

Popular drugstore products such as Ben-gay and Icy Hot contain chemicals called counterirritants (such as capsicum, found in chili peppers, and methyl salicylate, oil of wintergreen) that can create a feeling of heat, and menthol, which trigger a cooling sensation. In both cases, the active ingredients inflame the area near the pain, which stimulates the nerves and creates a milder sensation, distracting you from the pain you’re trying to treat. Lidocaine-based products have a numbing effect.

An over-the-counter patch that contains menthol, like the Absorbine Jr. Pain Relief Back Patch, costs about $4. A product with 4 percent lidocaine, like the Lidocare Pain Relief Patch Back/Shoulder, is about $19.

**Good to Know:** Some people might get relief from their pain symptoms, although these products will likely not ease pain entirely. This isn’t the same as using ice, which can reduce inflammation. Prescription-strength versions of lidocaine and capsaicin products can help, research suggests. OTC lidocaine products are your best bet because they’re closest to the prescription versions, our experts say.

**Heating Pads, Wraps and Bottles**

These cause blood vessels to dilate, which can increase blood flow to tissue and ease pain symptoms. ThermaCare Lower Back & Hip Heatwraps, which are disposable, cost about $7; the SoftHeat Pain Relief for Whole Body Wellness Wrap, which is reusable, runs about $20.

A 2016 analysis in the Journal of Chiropractic Medicine found that heat wraps increase muscle temperature and blood flow to tissue, says Alan Hilibrand, M.D., a spokesman for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons and co-director of spine surgery at the Sidney Kimmel Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia.

**Good to Know:** It’s worth trying one, but don’t use it for more than 20 minutes at a time. “I’ve had patients who fall asleep with them on and as a result develop mild burns,” Hilibrand says. Never put these products over creams or patches (see below). And note that a hot-water bottle works as well.

**Another Option**

**TENS**

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, or TENS, is available without a prescription. A small battery-operated device sends electrical currents through electrodes placed on areas that hurt.

**Good to Know:** It appears to be safe, but whether it reduces pain is still up in the air. Some research suggests it helps, but others haven’t found a benefit.

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**Be Wary Of Joint Supplements**

Despite their popularity, there’s little evidence that glucosamine and chondroitin supplements ease arthritis pain or improve joint function. That’s why the American College of Rheumatology says people should skip them.

**Good to Know:** Always check with your doctor regarding possible drug-supplement interactions. In addition, supplements aren’t regulated as carefully as medications, so you can’t be sure that what’s on the label is what’s in the bottle. If you want to give them a try anyway, stop after a few months if you don’t feel better. Avoid them entirely if you take the blood thinner warfarin (Coumadin and generic) because the supplements can intensify the effect of the drug.
**Veteran Patients’ Stories**

**FROM SKEPTIC TO BELIEVER.** After more than eight years on opioids for chronic pain, Richard Connell, New Jersey, decided to taper off the medications. But he still needed help with migraines dating back to his Air Force days in Thailand, Saigon, and other locations during the Vietnam War, and with osteoarthritis, a torn meniscus, bursitis, and joint inflammation. His VA doctors in pain management referred him to their center for health and wellness to learn about his options, “That was the best advice I’ve ever received,” says 63-year-old Connell.

Today, Connell turns to a variety of nondrug therapies, which he calls his toolbox. “They don’t all work, but when add them together, they do,” he says.

For Connell, being in pain means he constantly tenses up, which makes the pain worse. So, Connell uses Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, a meditation approach that allows him to accept and lessen his pain. Classes in the Alexander Technique, a practice popular in the arts community, have taught Connell to learn to relax his body’s response to pain. “It doesn’t take the pain away completely, but it alleviates it tremendously,” he says.

Connell has used acupuncture for migraines and has taken yoga classes and participates in a veterans’ pain group at his local VA. “It’s a lot of camaraderie,” he says. “We’re checking on each other to see how we’re doing.”

Originally, Connell was skeptical, “I didn’t believe in any of this stuff,” he says. “But for me, it’s working, incredibly.”

**A QUEST FOR WHAT WORKS.** When he enlisted in the Marines in 1991, Elijah Sacra was in such good shape he was soon tapped as a fitness instructor. But wear and tear from exercise, injuries, and a tactical vehicle accident left him with tendonitis in both elbows, neck pain, sciatic nerve pain, wrist pain, shoulder pain, lower back pain, and a hernia.

So began his quest to figure out how to fix himself, which evolved over 23 years into a career as an exercise physiologist and functional medicine health coach with a long list of certifications. Now 44, Sacra, of Durham, North Carolina, is also the executive director of Warrior Wellness Solutions, a non-profit that offers integrative health and wellness services to wounded, ill, and injured service members, their families, and caregivers.

Sacra has learned that to effectively manage chronic pain, it is necessary to focus on the biomechanics and function of your movement: you want to be able to stand, walk, run, push, pull, rotate, and bend without hurting yourself. It’s also important to solidify your posture and improve your functional movement patterns so you don’t get hurt in the future.

He encourages others to consider those basic elements when evaluating alternative movement therapies. Beyond that, he stresses the importance of individualized patient care based on your unique story. Quality sleep and nutrition, stress reduction, and a healthy digestive system are vital starting points. “We’re in a relentless quest to deliver these solutions to the veteran community,” says Sacra.

**Getting Treatments Covered**

VA facilities vary as to which nondrug alternatives for pain management are offered, so always ask what options are available to you.

**Additional Resources**

- www.bettermovement.org
- www.paintoolkit.org
- www.lifeisnow.ca/
- www.instituteforchronicpain.org
- “Explain Pain” book by Lorimer Moseley and David Butler
- “Why Do I Hurt?” book by Adriaan Louw


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