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Popping a pill for chronic pain may do more



harm than good

Published Jul. 7, 2017

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Natural therapies are more effective

When you experience pain from an injury or surgery, it can be distracting to the point of dominating your every waking moment. It's normal to want relief, and to want it fast. However, if you have chronic pain—the type that lasts for longer than three months—taking an opioid medication may not help. In fact, it can have the opposite effect.

"Opioids are very effective at reducing the intensity of acute pain—immediate post-surgical pain, pain related to acute trauma or sudden pain that doesn't last long," explained Dr. Shivang Desai, an interventional pain management specialist at Geisinger Community Medical Center in Scranton. "However, for chronic pain, these medications are not effective (in the long term) and may cause harmful side effects, or when used incorrectly, death."

Study shows opioids prolong chronic pain

A recent study from Geisinger Health System physicians Mellar P. Davis, M.D., and Zankhana Mehta, M.D., reveals that using opioid medications to treat chronic pain interferes with the way the body resolves pain naturally. It also increases the risk for a host of other negative side effects, such as addiction, depression, and problems with the pituitary gland and hypothalamus.

Patients using opioids for chronic pain management also experience slower healing of their wounds, more falls, infections, broken bones and cognitive impairment.

"The risks associated with using opioid medications for chronic pain management outweigh the benefits, which are minimal," said Dr. Desai. "It's better to treat chronic pain with other, longer lasting therapeutic approaches that work with the body's natural healing process."

Techniques for managing chronic pain

Alternative therapies for managing chronic pain have been proven to be more effective than opioids and other prescription medications. Your doctor can help you identify the necessary resources if you would like to pursue the following options:

- • Deep breathing and meditation: Meditation and deep breathing for as little as 20 minutes per day can reduce your pain. The technique involves focusing on individual body parts, noticing and accepting your pain, stretching and relaxing.
- • Aerobic exercise: Moderate exercise—such as walking for 30 minutes—can also help. If you have been taking opioid medications, you may be in a vicious cycle of sleep disruption and fatigue that will make exercise difficult. However, if you can push through that discomfort for about a week, it will start to become easier and beneficial.
- • Yoga and tai chi: Practicing yoga or tai chi can also be beneficial for chronic pain relief. It helps to balance your body and allows you to gently build strength in areas that may have been weakened by your pain. It also stretches and relaxes fatigued and painful muscles.
- • Anti-inflammatory diet: Inflammation and pain are closely related. By eating an anti-inflammatory diet, which emphasizes high-fiber fruits and vegetables, lean meats and whole foods, you can help to reduce your inflammation and relieve pain. Your doctor or a nutritionist can help to identify the foods you should focus on.
- • Cognitive behavioral therapy: CBT is a form of therapy that can help you change your thoughts about chronic pain. By altering your perception and improving your coping skills, you can reduce the pain.
- • Support groups: Support groups can put you in touch with other people who suffer from chronic pain. Sometimes connecting with other people who share your experience can be helpful.

"In most cases, you'll benefit by pursuing a combination of these therapies to manage your chronic pain," said Dr. Desai. "If you're currently using medications and not finding relief, try to stay hopeful—reducing or eliminating your pain is possible with the right approach."

Dr. Shivang Desai, MD, is a fellowship trained interventional pain management specialist at Geisinger Community Medical Center in Scranton. For more information on scheduling an appointment with Dr. Desai or another Geisinger pain management specialist, please call 800-275-6401 or visit Geisinger.org.

