

Acute Pain. Chronic Pain.

Acute to Chronic Pain

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

KNOW THE FACTS.



Pain, defined by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), is “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage.”

Acute pain, defined by the IASP, “happens suddenly, starts out sharp or intense, and serves as a warning sign of disease or threat to the body.” Causes include injury, surgery, illness, trauma, burn, or the process around surgeries/procedures. Acute pain generally lasts from a few minutes to less than six months. It usually disappears whenever the underlying cause is treated or healed.



Chronic pain, defined by the IASP, is “pain that persists or recurs for longer than three months.” Oftentimes, such pain becomes the sole or predominant clinical problem for individuals, and may warrant specific diagnostic evaluation, therapy, and rehabilitation. Neuroscience research has demonstrated that **chronic pain can become a disease in itself**, with measurable changes in the brain, spinal cord, and peripheral nervous system.

Acute to Chronic Pain



Acute-to-chronic pain refers to the transition of acute pain to chronic pain. In many cases, when acute pain persists longer than three months, it turns chronic, which can last for years or a lifetime.

Managing Acute Pain vs. Chronic Pain

Acute Pain

Treating acute pain typically involves treating both the pain and its cause—injury, medical procedure, illness, etc. This type of treatment often involves a short-term change in routine. Acute pain management may include:

- Rest
- Application of heat or ice
- Compression and/or elevation
- Over-the-counter (OTC) medications
- Opioids (in lower dosages and for shorter durations)
- Movement modalities
- Behavioral health approaches
- Complementary and integrative health such as massage or acupuncture

Chronic Pain

An individualized, multimodal, multidisciplinary approach with coordination of care from various health care professionals is considered best practice for individuals living with chronic pain. Chronic pain management may include:

- Self-management techniques, such as mindfulness or meditation
- Functional-based rehabilitation to help with performing daily activities
- Restorative therapies, such as physical and occupational therapies
- Complementary and integrative health, such as yoga or tai chi
- Behavioral health approaches
- Medications (OTCs, NSAIDs, non-opioids, and opioids)
- Medical cannabis
- External medical devices
- Interventional procedures

To learn more, including ways to manage pain and find support, visit [uspainfoundation.org](https://www.uspainfoundation.org).



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