Can Chronic Pain Make You Feel and Look Older?

by LANA BARHUM

Chronic Pain and Aging

Chronic pain will not only make you feel older, but it will also make you look older. After all, there is not one area of your life that chronic pain doesn't touch or affect negatively, and that adds up.

What Is the Evidence?

One study reported in the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* finds chronic pain patients, ages 50 to 59, looked similar to healthy patients who were two and three decades older than them.

The study also found these patients were functioning as if they are older, especially with walking, climbing stairs, using their arms for lifting and performing other tasks, and even with taking care of themselves, including when bathing, dressing and eating.

A 2014 review in *American Psychologist* provided a comprehensive look at the many problems experienced by older adults living with chronic pain, and how these problems contribute to and promote the aging process. Symptoms experienced by people with chronic pain include sleep problems, activity limitations, depression and increased risk for physical health problems, including heart disease and diabetes.

A 2014 meta-analysis reported in the journal, *PLoS One*, finds widespread pain increases the risk for dying of cardiovascular disease or cancer. While the risk is mild, it is still evidenced chronic pain has a significant effect on quality of life and the aging process.

Is Chronic Pain a Part of the Aging Process?

Pain is not something to expect once you hit middle age. Of course, some occasional wear and tear are consistent with getting older, such as the knee, hip or foot pain due to deterioration of joints, causing pain and stiffness.

Pain is complicated, and your mind plays an important role. Stress, depression and mental health will all play a part in how pain affects you.

To better manage pain and normalize the aging process, chronic pain patients need to be willing to seek out treatment for both emotional health problems and physical pain.

But in the age where opioid use seems to be associated with addiction, many doctors are concerned about their patients becoming addicted, as well scrutiny from licensing boards. And patients themselves won't ask for pain medications because they are afraid to become addicted or to be perceived as drug seeking.

How Chronic Pain Accelerates Aging

Cellular aging is likely to blame for accelerating the aging process in people living with chronic pain.

Cellular aging is defined as an ongoing decline in the resistance to stress and increased susceptibility to cellular damage and loss of cellular function, eventually resulting in cell death. Cell death increases your chance of developing age-related diseases and worsens your pain.

One 2017 study reported in the journal, *Pain Reports* finds a connection between cellular aging in people with high levels of knee osteoarthritis. And cellular aging is more evident in older adults who have high levels of stress and pain, this according to a 2012 report from researchers out of the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA.

Researchers from the University of Michigan have also found a connection between premature cellular aging and chronic pain. Their research looked at the relationship between cell length and pain in women with fibromyalgia, a disorder that causes widespread muscle and tender point pain.

In this study, the 66 women with fibromyalgia had blood drawn, and telomere lengths from their bloodwork were measured against those of 22 healthy participates. DNA telomeres are indexes of cell age, and they play a role in a variety of age-related illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis.

What the researchers found was that the women who had shorter telomere lengths were experiencing more pain. Shorter telomeres are associated with cognitive dysfunction, arthritis, dementia and many other age-related conditions.

In addition to confirming a link between premature cellular aging and chronic pain, the University of Michigan researchers found a connection between chronic pain and physical aging.

Other studies have shown emotional stress, anxiety and untreated depression – all factors connected to chronic pain – can also speed up the aging process by shortening telomeres. And according to researchers out of the University of California San Francisco, California, USA, positive changes in diet, stress management, exercise and social support can lead to longer telomeres.

The Bottom Line...

It is possible that people living with chronic pain are aging much more rapidly than our peers without pain. Most people not surprised by this theory, as there is a lot of emotional and physical stress associated with living with all that pain.

Living with debilitating pain day in and day out is likely to have consequences, as evidenced by the research. Interestingly, when chronic and associated health issues are addressed, the aging process can be slowed down.

It is also clear the issue of chronic pain isn’t well addressed from the patient’s perspective, and that is unfortunate. There is no reason for people to endure pain on a daily basis, to consider chronic pain normal, and for it accelerate a person’s physical aging.