What is Chronic Muscle Pain?

by ERIN SCOTT

Chronic Muscle Pain

The pain of muscle aches and strains happens to most people at some point in their life. However, when it continues for three months or more, it becomes chronic.

Muscle pain, or myalgia, can be incredibly difficult to live with. I, personally, get muscle pain in my legs, which makes it difficult to walk and move about.

What Causes Chronic Muscle Pain?

There is no one cause for chronic muscle pain. Mechanical causes, like repetitive strain injuries, can mean that your muscles hurt, but various chronic illnesses, such as fibromyalgia, also cause muscle pain. Each cause has its own mechanism for making your muscles hurt.

- **Chronic inflammation**, or myositis, will cause your muscles to be painful. Whether this is from overuse or an illness, if your muscles are inflamed, they will be sore. Research has also shown that many people with chronic inflammation have abnormal levels of muscle enzymes.
- **Metabolic issues**, or metabolic myopathies, are genetic conditions that affect the energy processes that fuel the muscles. This can lead to muscle pain and fatigue, especially after activity.
- **Nerves misfiring** in your central nervous system might also be responsible for sending “bad signals” to your muscles, causing pain.
- **Illnesses** can cause muscle pain in many ways, such as through malnutrition and by altering your body chemistry. Studies have shown that people with certain illnesses have irregular levels of various chemicals in their muscles.

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a condition characterized by widespread pain, including muscle pain, tenderness, and stiffness. There are 18 painful trigger points that are used for diagnosis. In addition to pain, you might have headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, issues with sleep, fatigue, and cognitive difficulties known as “brain fog.”

Fibromyalgia pain is theorized to be caused by the central nervous system malfunctioning and not processing pain and sensory signals properly. This extends to your muscles as well, leading to muscular pain. The University of Maryland Medical Center also found that people with fibromyalgia have lower levels of phosphocreatine and adenosine triphosphate (ATP) in their muscles. These chemicals help regulate the levels of calcium, which are important for muscles to be able to relax and contract.

Multiple Sclerosis

Muscle pain is a very common symptom of multiple sclerosis (MS). The MS International Federation explains that

there are several types of MS pain, including back pain, burning pain, and painful muscle spasms.

Muscular pain associated with MS can be caused by muscle weakness, imbalance, and spasticity, often in the legs, hips, and arms, from a lack of activity. You may also get painful spasms in your legs, especially during your sleep.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) or myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) might be the primary thought of as an illness that causes severe fatigue, however, it also causes very sore muscles. ME Research UK states that people with CFS/ME may have, “muscle pain that may include tenderness and swelling.”

Several studies have found that that CFS/ME patients have increased levels of inflammation, and other mechanisms, such as metabolic abnormalities, that create muscle fatigue and pain.

Other Causes

The above illnesses are only a few that can cause muscle pain. There are many others that can cause pain as well.

Chronic Lyme disease often causes muscle aches, as do many thyroid conditions, like hypothyroidism. The inflammatory disorder polymyalgia rheumatic causes pain and stiffness in the shoulders, neck, arms, hips, thighs, and joints, as well as fevers and a general sense of feeling unwell.

Muscular dystrophy is an umbrella term for a group of serious genetic disorders that progressively affect your muscles, causing pain and weakness. Many of the types of muscular dystrophies affect children, although some can manifest in adulthood.

It’s important to note that being low in certain vitamins and minerals can cause muscle aches and pain too. For example, vitamin D, B vitamins, thiamine, as well as magnesium, calcium, iron, sodium, and potassium are all important for our muscle health.

How Can I Get Chronic Muscle Pain Relief?

How you treat your chronic pain will depend on the cause, but there are many treatment options out there to help you.

Physical Therapy

It is important to keep your muscles stretched and strengthened, in order to limit imbalance and weakness.

Gentle stretches or yoga programs can help ease sore muscles, but it is always best to seek the advice of a doctor or physiotherapist before starting any exercise program. A physiotherapist can also help with specialized techniques, like the ‘Stretch and Spray,’ which involves spraying the affected area with a coolant, and then stretching it out.

Medication

Over the counter pain relievers, such as asprin, can be very useful to counter the aches of chronic muscle pain. As can non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), as they help to relieve the inflammation in your muscles.

Medications to help relax your muscles, such as such as methocarbamol or diazepam, can help to ease the pain of spasms and tight muscles. Additionally, your doctor might prescribe you stronger pain relief, like opioids, or medication specific to your condition.

Alternative Treatments

Massage therapy can be a great way to relax painful muscles, stop spasms, and ease stiffness. Many also find acupuncture and dry needling effect to help target painful trigger points and relieve pain.

Biofeedback training, especially electromyographic biofeedback, can be particularly useful for muscle pain. You can also use hot and cold compresses to help with pain and inflammation, and a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machine to help relieve spasms and throbbing pain.

The Bottom Line...

Muscle pain can be difficult, but there are many ways you can approach treating it. By getting the correct diagnosis, and starting a treatment plan, there is hope you can get some relief from the aches and pains you are feeling.