

# Manage Your Chronic Pain

SAN FRANCISCO  
HEALTH PLAN



*Here for you*

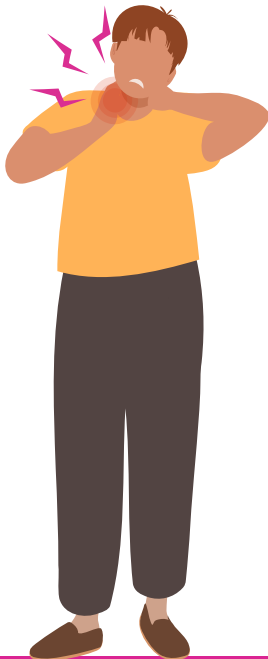
## What Is Chronic Pain?

Chronic pain is pain that lasts for more than 3 months. The pain can be there all the time or may come and go. It can happen in any part of your body and can have many causes.

Anyone can get chronic pain. About 1 out of 5 adults in the U.S. have chronic pain and seek care.



## What Does Chronic Pain Feel Like?



### Chronic pain in your body may feel like:

- Aching
- Burning
- Stiffness
- Stinging
- Throbbing
- Pinching

Your pain can be mild, or it may hurt so much that it gets in the way of your daily activities, such as working, spending time with friends, or taking care of yourself.

### Chronic pain can affect your mood and may lead to:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Fatigue (feeling tired often)
- Insomnia (trouble with sleeping)
- Mood swings

## What Causes Chronic Pain?

### Chronic pain can happen for many reasons, such as having:

- A chronic condition (e.g., arthritis or cancer)
- An autoimmune disorder (e.g., lupus)
- A recent or old injury

Sometimes, very high blood sugar (like diabetes) can damage nerves and cause chronic pain. Other times the cause of chronic pain is unknown. Some people suffer from chronic pain even if they did not have any past injury or illness.

## What Is Your Pain Like?

Chronic pain can affect many parts of your life. Use the chart below to rate how your pain felt this past week. Circle the number that best describes how you felt, with 0 meaning “no pain” and 10 meaning “pain as bad as you have ever felt”.



|  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1. What number/emoji best describes how you felt this past week?                                 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 2. What number/emoji best describes how much pain has got in the way of your joy this past week? | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 3. What number/emoji best describes how much pain got in the way of your daily activities?       | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

## Ways to Treat Chronic Pain

There are many treatments you can try to manage your pain. Oral medications for pain can bring down inflammation, relax muscles, or calm nerves. There are also creams and gels that can bring down inflammation or numb the part of the body that hurts.

**There are many non-drug options that may be helpful to relieve your pain. People often try a mix of treatments and find relief. Treatment options may include:**

- **Acupuncture** is a form of Chinese medicine. Very thin needles are placed into your skin at certain points of the body. The goal is to change the body’s energy flow so it can heal itself.



- **Exercise** helps to keep you strong and flexible. Talk with your primary care provider\* (PCP) about types of exercise, and how much is right for you. Learn more with the fact sheet on **Moving More** at SFHP Health and Wellness.

- **Guided imagery** is when you close your eyes and create pictures in your mind to relax. Sit in a relaxed posture and think of a place or activity that has made you happy.

- **Hot or cold therapy:** Use of warmth (e.g., hot water bottle, warm baths/showers, etc.) or cold (e.g., ice packs) to relieve pain.



- **Massage** involves pressing, rubbing, and kneading parts of the body. It may also help blood flow.

- **Meditation** helps relax your body and quiet your mind. When you meditate, focus on your breath, an object, a word, or a phrase. You can sit, lay down, or walk.



You may use online tools or smartphone apps such as Insight Timer. Visit **insighttimer.com** for free guided meditations and workshops led by teachers around the world.



## Ways to Treat Chronic Pain (continued)

- **Mindful relaxation** helps to get rid of tension in your muscles. It may help you sleep, manage stress, and give you more energy. Try breathing slowly while focusing on an object. You may try to breathe in while tensing your muscles then breathe out while relaxing your muscles.
- **Pain support groups** offer community and education on how to take care of your pain.
- **Physical therapy** is when a doctor helps you with exercises to build your strength, increase movement, and lower your pain. SFHP covers certain types of physical therapy. Talk with your PCP to learn more about getting physical therapy for your chronic pain.



- **Tai chi** is a series of slow, gentle movements with a focus on breath and awareness.
- **Yoga and Pilates** is a mix of stretches and poses with a focus on breathing. There are many types of yoga and Pilates for all ages and body types.



Visit [sfhp.org/wellness](https://sfhp.org/wellness) to find a wellness class online or near you.



*\*Your primary care provider is the doctor, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner in charge of your health care.*

Sometimes people will think that strong pain medications, like opioids, are the best option. However, opioids can be unsafe, and are often only used for:

- Cancer
- Autoimmune disease
- After surgery
- Palliative care (ongoing treatment for people who have severe illness, such as advanced heart failure)
- Hospice care (to make a person comfortable and pain-free at the end of their life)

## SFHP Benefits

Talk with your PCP to see what services you can get to help manage your pain. Some services you can get at no cost if it is medically necessary. Talk with your PCP if you are interested in services such as:

- Acupuncture
- Physical Therapy



Learn more at  
[sfhp.org/mc/benefits](https://sfhp.org/mc/benefits).



## Your Health Care Team

**It is important to get all your prescriptions from one health care team and one pharmacy.** Your team can be:

- Your PCP
- Pain management specialist
- Other providers, like a physical therapist

When you only have one care team and one pharmacy, they can make sure you are taking the right medications. Some drugs do not work well together (called drug interaction). Sometimes it can harm you if you take too much of a certain ingredient that is in 2 different medications.

Your care team can make sure all your medications are safe to take together. Taking your medications or a mix of them can affect your vision, attention span, and reaction time, which can make it unsafe to drive or operate machinery. Talk with your pharmacist or PCP if you have any questions about your medications. Please visit the **FDA** to learn more.



## Pain Management Agreement

If you and your care team have decided that you need to take opioids, you may need to sign a pain management agreement. A pain management agreement is a contract that explains:

- Your treatment plan
- What you can expect from your health care team
- What your health care team expects from you
- The rules you have agreed to



**Most pain management agreements have a common set of rules, such as:**

- Keeping your appointments
- Having a routine urine test
- Taking your medications the way you are supposed to
- Only getting medications from one health care team
- Avoiding illegal or "street" drugs
- Only getting refills as scheduled

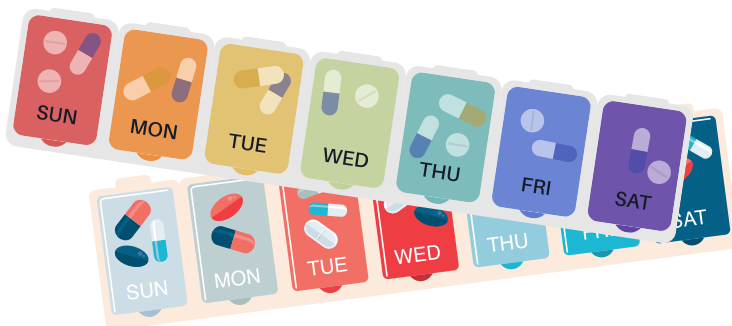
This pain management agreement helps you to work with your health care team with trust and responsibility. Your health care team will also sign the form.

## Side Effects and Overdose

Prescribed opioid medicine for pain treatment can have benefits, but also risks. Many people who take opioids may get side effects.

Some common side effects are:

- Low sex drive
- Constipation (not able to pass stool)
- Itching
- Headache
- Dry mouth
- Upset stomach
- Feeling very tired



Most side effects get better with time. If you have constipation while on opioids, you may need to take medicine such as a laxative, a stool softener, or a natural remedy like prune juice to help you empty your bowels. Talk with your PCP if you have any side effects from opioids.

Opioids may also cause bad reactions that may make your breathing slow or even stop. This can happen if your body can't handle the opioids that you took on that day. It may lead to an overdose or even death.

Overdose can occur even when taking opioids as prescribed. The risk increases when opioids are misused, abused, or taken with other medications or substances that can cause sleepiness (like alcohol).

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## Overdose Safety

The CDC recommends that if you are on prescribed opioids, you should only be given the lowest dose that can still help you, and for the shortest time. If your care team prescribes an opioid for you, ask questions so that you are sure about your treatment plan. You can ask how to take it, when to take it, and when to stop.



### To avoid an opioid overdose:

- Do not mix opioids with alcohol or medications that make you sleepy, such as over the counter medicine for colds or allergies that have antihistamines (like Vicks NyQuil or Tylenol Cold), or other prescribed medicine such as benzodiazepines ("benzos" such as Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, Valium).
- Be extra careful if you miss or change any opioid doses, feel ill, or start any new medicine.

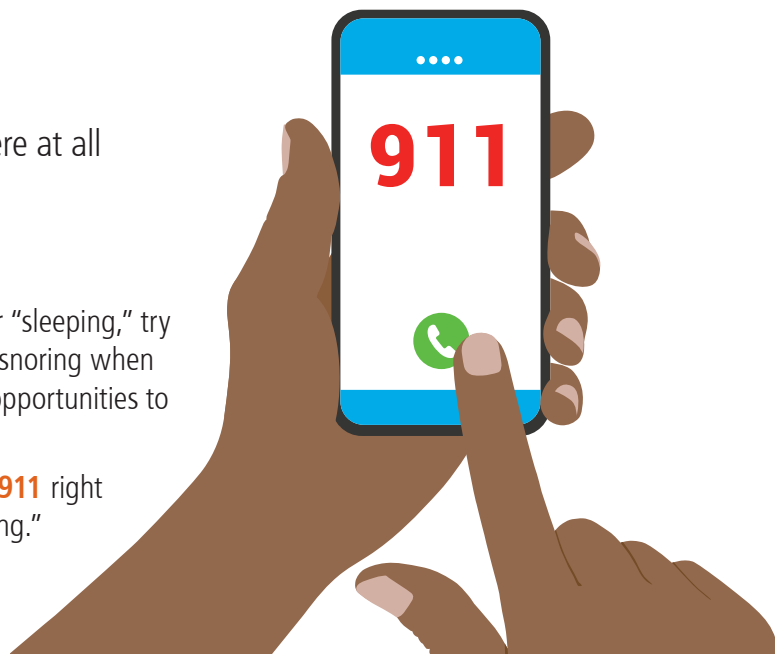
### Overdose Safety (continued)

#### Know the Signs of an Opioid Overdose

- Breathing is slow and shallow or stopped
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Face is very pale or clammy
- Fingernails and lips turn blue or purplish black
- For lighter skinned people, the skin tone may turn bluish purple; for darker skinned people, it may turn grayish or ashen
- Limp body
- Loss of consciousness
- Pulse (heartbeat) is slow, irregular, or not there at all
- Small eye pupils
- Not responding to outside sounds or touch

If someone is making unusual sounds while they appear “sleeping,” try to wake them up. Many loved ones think a person was snoring when the person was having an overdose. These are missed opportunities to save a life.

If you think someone is having an opioid overdose, call **911** right away. Tell them, “Someone is not responding or breathing.” Please be sure to give a certain address and/or describe your location.



### Overdose Prevention and Narcan (Naloxone)

Narcan is an emergency medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose. If you are taking opioid medicine, ask your PCP for Narcan or buy it over the counter. You may also get Narcan from clinics and community programs in San Francisco. Find their most recent hours at their website:



- **San Francisco Department of Public Health**
- **San Francisco AIDS Foundation, 6th Street Harm Reduction Center**

It is good to carry Narcan with you if you or a loved one is using opioids.

Narcan is a nasal spray. It should be used if someone is too sleepy or can't be woken up because of an opioid overdose. Learn more about Narcan (naloxone) and how to use it at **CDC**.



# Your Medication List

Use this list to keep track of what medications you are taking, who prescribed them to you, and when you started taking them. You can share this list with your PCP and family members.

|    | Name of Medicine and Dosage | Prescribing Provider | Date You Started the Medicine |
|----|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1  |                             |                      |                               |
| 2  |                             |                      |                               |
| 3  |                             |                      |                               |
| 4  |                             |                      |                               |
| 5  |                             |                      |                               |
| 6  |                             |                      |                               |
| 7  |                             |                      |                               |
| 8  |                             |                      |                               |
| 9  |                             |                      |                               |
| 10 |                             |                      |                               |

Resources:



Overdose Prevention Basics  
National Harm Reduction Coalition  
[harmreduction.org](https://harmreduction.org)



Medicine and Driving  
FDA  
[fda.gov](https://fda.gov)

For more information call Customer Service at **1(415) 547-7800** or visit [sfhp.org/health-ed](https://sfhp.org/health-ed)  
24/7 Nurse Advice Line **1(877) 977-3397** | Talk to a doctor 24/7 [sfhp.org/teladoc](https://sfhp.org/teladoc)