

Ease your aches and pains without drugs

Written by meg sibal, m.d.

Saturday, 28 November 2015 10:37



ACCORDING to a recent large study, more than 25 million Americans suffer from some degree of pain on a daily basis, and that nearly 40 million experience severe pain — which many of us try to relieve by reaching for over-the-counter (OTC) painkillers, says the November 2015 issue of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Focus on Healthy Aging.

Mount Sinai geriatrician Patricia Bloom, M.D., who recommends caution when it comes to using OTC painkillers regularly, says, “Many people think these medications are without risk simply because they are easily available, but they have many side effects, some of which are potentially life-threatening for seniors.”

In the study (*Journal of Pain*, August), women and the elderly were more apt to report relatively severe pain and individuals in the two most severe pain groups were likely to have worse health status and suffer from more disability than those with less severe pain.

Dr. Bloom cautions that “pain impairs the body’s ability to heal, and can actually make you sicker — unrecognized or untreated pain can lead to loss of physical functioning, depression, decreased socialization, insomnia, and falls due to weakness and gait instability.”

Delirium can be another complication.

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Unfortunately, pain-relieving drugs carry risk factors for seniors — in fact, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently strengthened the warning labels for widely used NSAIDs like ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (Naprosyn, Aleve), noting that they can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, adds the health letter.

Acetaminophen — another widely used painkiller — is safe if used correctly, but its presence in many OTC cold and flu medications means it's easy to overdose.

Thus, it's recommended that older adults take no more than 3 grams a day of the drug.

Therefore, these complementary health approaches and non-pharmacological ways are offered to help mitigate chronic pain:

- Yoga — Designed to improve postural issues that can underpin pain, strengthen muscles and preserve flexibility, yoga involves gentle stretching — “Studies suggest that gentle hatha yoga can decrease pain and improve your ability to carry out activities of daily living if you suffer from back pain,” Dr. Bloom says.

- Tai chi — An ancient martial art, tai chi consists of slow, gentle movements called “forms” — these movements involve rotation and flexion of the torso, extension of the hips and knees, weight shifting postural control, and alignment, with and without arm coordination. The different forms improve strength, flexibility and balance, and can help ease pain and stiffness, as well as reduce the risk of falls.

- Pilates — Designed to develop the core muscles (the muscles around your trunk and pelvis) that support your spine, Pilates is a system of strengthening and stretching exercises — “Many people who take part in Pilates exercises confirm that it has improved their range of motion, as well as helped decrease back, neck and joint pain,” says Dr. Bloom.

- Massage — Based on studies, massage is an effective treatment strategy for reducing muscle tension and pain, and it can also help boost your mood if chronic pain is causing anxiety and depression — stick to Swedish massage, since it is a more gentle form.

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- Acupuncture — A form of traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture involves the insertion of very fine needles into certain areas in order to clear “blockages” in the flow of energy through the body — “Several studies indicate that acupuncture may be effective in easing pain, and few risks are associated with the practice,” says Dr. Bloom, “although you may experience a slight burning sensation when the needles are inserted.”

- Mindfulness — A form of non-religious meditation, mindfulness consists of simple practices to train the mind’s attention in ways that have been shown to reduce stress and the impact of pain, and also to alleviate many medical and psychological conditions.

A certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teacher, Dr. Bloom has been involved in studies concerning the use of mindfulness for post-operative pain and chronic pain — “There is quite a significant body of scientific research concerning the use of mindfulness for pain,” she notes.

“Data indicate it may help to reduce the intensity of pain, and improve people’s function and ability to engage with life despite pain.”

Many community and senior centers now offer courses in mindfulness.

Meanwhile, the Harvard Medical School Harvard Men’s Health Watch November, says that for general prevention of musculoskeletal aches and pains, regular physical activity is the cornerstone — perhaps supplemented with some gentle stretching.

Walking, swimming, jogging and cycling are all good options — to keep your body pain-free, make sure to vary your activity, adds the health letter.

But it cautions that muscle and joint pain sometimes points to more than simple lack of exercise — arthritis gradually breaks down the joint-cushioning cartilage where bone meets bone; torn tissues and squeezed nerves can cause pain to keep you awake at night.

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These specific injuries and conditions may require medical attention.

While Dr. Bloom frequently recommends that her patients consider non-pharmacologic interventions for the treatment of chronic pain, she also cautions that if you have a specific condition which requires avoiding certain exercises — for example, osteoporosis or osteopenia, both of which weaken the bones — “don’t do exercises that require flexing of the spine,” she says.

Always use qualified practitioners — visit the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (www.nccih.org) for links.

Finally, if you are considering (or already use) complementary approaches, let your doctor know, Dr. Bloom concludes.