

Pain, Drugs & Work Culture

A trifecta leading
to hazards for
workers and
workplaces



Chronic Pain?

Chronic pain (or persistent pain) is determined when pain happens to last longer than three months.



And...

Chronic pain is
a disease



**World Health
Organization**

Prevalence of Chronic Pain in Society

- **Eight million** people in Canada live with chronic pain
- Studies suggest that **up to 40% of North American workers** experience chronic pain.
- This exceeds the number of people with cancer, diabetes, and heart disease combined.
- We also know that pain ***disproportionately impacts workers in the trades.***



Complex and varied

Chronic pain is linked to conditions that include:

- ✓ Headache
 - ✓ Arthritis
 - ✓ Cancer
 - ✓ Nerve pain
 - ✓ Back pain
 - ✓ Fibromyalgia
- Chronic pain can be an unstable condition.
 - Pain can be debilitating

Chronic pain and work



Chronic pain is associated with

- increased absence,
- decreased job performance,
- concentration problems,
- physical limits
- displays of impatience toward coworkers and customers,
- problematic substance use.

Chronic pain can be an invisible condition and workers will often go to great lengths to conceal it.

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)

- According to the WSIB, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) represent over 40 per cent of all lost-time compensation claims in Ontario.
- Left unaddressed, MSDs threaten both worker health and safety and businesses' economic performance.
- About 34 per cent of construction workers have at least one MSD symptom.
- **Compared to those without MSDs, prescription opioid use tripled among construction workers with MSDs.**



Drugs on site?

Yup, likely!

So....what do we do?

**Focus on
Safety First!**

Safety First!

1. Manage impairment concerns effectively
2. Create a safe work environment – help prevent accidents, injuries and illness and foster employee well-being.

Do this by:

- Paying careful attention to work conditions, and identifying and eliminating potential hazards, could prevent chronic pain for many workers.
- Practice safe ergonomics and help structure work to minimize chronic strain on the body where possible.
- Check out CSA's Z1008 on managing impairment in the workplace.
- And more...



Employers have a duty to support

- Workplaces can support those living with chronic pain, just as they can support individuals living with other chronic illnesses like diabetes or cancer.
- Because chronic pain is considered a disease and can be disabling, it should be managed through a workplace disability management (WDM) system.
- Disabilities are a protected ground under the Human Rights Act of Ontario.
- Supporting workers as they manage their pain at work is not only a legal obligation; it is also the compassionate response to those in need of accommodation and support in the workplace.



Culture and Stigma towards Chronic Pain

- Personal attitudes and beliefs about chronic pain can place undue barriers in the workplace.
- Workers may feel reluctant to talk about their pain due to the fear of stigmatization, discrimination, or job loss.
- “Suck it up and get back to work” attitude can lead to self-medication, increasing risk to worker and co-workers.



Supporting chronic pain at work

A 2021 Harvard Business Review study showed that leaders have limited awareness and knowledge of how to lead those with chronic pain.

- 80% of leaders recognize that chronic pain was a concern for their workers.
- 80% of leaders do not know how to deal with workers in pain.
- 77% of leaders want to know what they can do to help.



So what can be done to help?

1. Listen to the worker and work towards finding solutions
2. Help all workers to understand the need for safe and informed chronic pain management.
3. Increase access to chronic pain management resources for all workers.
4. Encourage workers who have chronic or acute pain to seek **individualized pain management treatment plans** with a knowledgeable primary care provider.
5. Be ready in case an opioid related emergency occurs – get Naloxone on every work site!
6. Demonstrate compassion, it could be you next.

Need Naloxone kits for your workplace?

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Reverse
an Opioid Overdose**



A mini "Pain" Safety Talk Series

Understanding chronic pain

The Government of Canada estimates that 1 in 4 Canadians aged 15 or older lives with chronic pain, a condition that affects both physical and mental health, and inhibits work, play, relationships, and overall quality of life.

The World Health Organization recognizes chronic pain as a disease itself and not just a symptom of something else.

Chronic pain (or persistent pain) is pain that lasts longer than three months. It can occur without a known cause, after an injury has healed, or after a condition has been treated.

Explain dangers

- Workers of the trades are disproportionately impacted by pain.
- Chronic pain is linked to other conditions, like headaches, arthritis, cancer, nerve pain, back pain, and fibromyalgia.
- People who experience pain often feel isolated. This can create barriers to accessing health services and deter them from seeking support.
- Chronic pain is associated with increased absence, decreased job performance, and concentration problems, physical limits and displays of impatience toward coworkers and customers, and, for some, problematic substance use.
- People will go to great lengths to conceal their chronic pain. Therefore, it can be hard to spot in the workplace.
- A person with chronic pain can experience fluctuating symptoms, and might not experience pain every day.

Identify controls

- Chronic pain should not be self-managed; if

you are experiencing chronic pain, work with your health care provider to find solutions.

- Treating chronic pain with drugs is most effective as part of a pain management plan. The plan should be developed in consultation with a primary care provider who is experienced in treating chronic pain. This plan could involve different types of therapy and treatments.
- Chronic pain treatment goals may include a reduction in pain and/or improvements in cognitive health, psychological health, social function, or physical function.

Demonstrate

- Remember chronic pain is a disease that requires treatment and compassion like other diseases.
- Demonstrate compassion. The Canadian Mental Health Association says that we practice compassion by expressing genuine interest and concern, actively listening without judgement, and validating of experiences and emotions. Doing so on a regular basis is vital for forming meaningful support networks at work.
- Encourage workers to learn more about and how to manage chronic pain by credible resources.
- Watch the Guardian's short video [chronic pain and how does it work](#).
- Review resources on [The Power of Portal](#) and recommend the website to workers.

Pain management at work

Because chronic pain is a disease and can be disabling, it should be managed through a workplace disability management (WDM) system.

Disabilities are a protected ground under the Ontario Human Rights Code. Supporting workers as they manage their pain at work is not only a legal obligation; it is also the compassionate response to those in need of accommodation and support in the workplace.

Often, workplaces can be a source of chronic pain. Workplaces should support those living with chronic pain, just as they would with any other chronic illness.

Explain dangers

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are a major cause of pain among construction workers.

According to the WSIB, MSDs represent over 40 per cent of all lost-time compensation claims in Ontario. Left unaddressed, MSDs threaten both worker health and safety and a business's economic performance.

About 34 per cent of construction workers have at least one MSD symptom. Compared to those without MSDs, prescription opioid use is tripled among construction workers with MSDs.

Identify controls

Find solutions together

- Focus on listening and effective communication. Conversations are critical if workplaces want to find effective solutions. However, leaders should not pressure their employees to share information about chronic pain by asking pointed, pain-related questions or demanding workers to disclose their pain.
- If leaders aren't sure how to help a particular worker, they should ask the worker what they need.

Focus on preventing work-related pain

- Jobs that involved heavy lifting, standing all day, or working in awkward positions can cause or exacerbate pain.
- Construction workplaces must adopt ergonomic solutions in order to reduce MSDs.
- Workplaces need to support workers in injury recovery with effective pain management.

Design jobs with autonomy and variety

- Autonomy and skill use have positive implications for chronic pain because workers can choose how and when they do work tasks depending on their ability at a given time.
- Working at a job that requires multiple skills can keep workers with chronic pain functional even when they are experiencing pain.

Demonstrate

- Paying careful attention to work conditions and identifying and eliminating potential hazards could prevent chronic pain for many workers.
- Increase access to chronic-pain management resources.
- Build a chronic-pain management program for employees and their supervisors
- Educate workers about pain management, conduct frequent pain assessment within the organization.
- Support employees with chronic pain by listening in order to understand.
- Help all workers to understand the need for safe and informed chronic pain management.
- Encourage workers to seek individualized pain management treatment plans with a knowledgeable primary care provider.

Talking about pain with your doctor

For many trade workers, complete relief from pain may be impossible after an accident or illness.

Coping with chronic pain can make it difficult to work safely and without mental distraction. Figuring out how to work and manage your pain is a matter of safety.

It is important that pain is treated by a qualified health care professional and not self-managed, especially if self-management involves using illicit drugs, including illegally-produced opioids.

Explain dangers

Opioids, if used under the care of a physician, can be an effective way for an injured worker of opioids for treatment of chronic pain comes with some serious risks.

The risks for opioid-related harms, such as addiction, increase with prolonged use.

Chronic (or persistent) pain, opioids are sometimes used along with other therapies as part of a chronic pain treatment plan.

Due to a lack of scientific literature that supports the use of opioids for chronic pain, it is important to work with your health care provider to ensure you are using your pain relief effectively.

Losses of opioids should only be used in chronic pain patients if they allow the patient to function and achieve practical goals, such as being able to function at work.

Controls

- Advocate for making changes required to address personal accommodation needs and systemic barriers faced by workers who experience chronic pain.
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When you are prescribed an opioid, Health Canada asks you to ask your health care provider questions:

- Why am I being prescribed this medication?
- What are the benefits of this medication?
- When can I expect to feel better?
- How much pain relief should I expect from this medication?
- How long should I be taking this medication for?
- Are there any alternatives to opioids I could take?
- What are the risks and potential side effects of taking opioids?
- Is there a risk of substance use disorder ("addiction")?
- What should I do if the medication is not working?

To advise you properly, your health care provider needs all of the facts. You should share, at a minimum, any concerns you have about taking an opioid, whether you are a smoker, if you are taking other medications, if you are undertaking other therapies or strategies to manage your pain, or if you have a history of problematic alcohol or drug use.

Demonstrate

Advocate for making changes required to address personal accommodation needs and systemic barriers faced by workers who experience chronic pain.

Chronic Pain Management, Disability Management and Ergonomics

- [Opioid Abuse in Chronic Pain — Misconceptions and Mitigation Strategies | New England Journal of Medicine \(nejm.org\)](#)
- [About Chronic Pain, its Impacts, and Treatments](#)
- [CSA Z1011:20 Work disability management system](#)
- [Information on talking to your doctor about prescribed opioids](#)
- [Pain Canada](#)
- [McMaster University Michael G. DeGroote National Pain Centre](#) (includes a listing of Canadian pain clinics)
- [Canadian Pain Society](#)
- [Chronic Pain Network](#)
- [Arthritis Society: Arthritis Pain Management Guide](#)
- [Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health: Evidence on pain management](#)
- [International Association for the Study of Pain](#)
- [Centre of Research Expertise for the Prevention of Musculoskeletal Disorders](#)

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