

# Help for Chronic Pain

For an estimated 76 million Americans, pain is a way of life, clouding their days and tormenting their nights.

**In fact, chronic pain affects** more Americans than diabetes, heart disease and cancer combined. “Untreated or poorly managed pain can rewire the nervous system, dramatically affecting a person’s physical and mental health,” says **Dr. Danielle Perret**. She is a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician with UC Irvine Pain Medicine, an outpatient practice located at Gottschalk Medical Plaza on the UC Irvine campus. “Over time, this results in a vicious cycle of decreased physical activity and depression, which delays healing.” So serious is the problem that doctors view pain lasting more than three months as a disease in itself.

Patients may have back pain, neck pain, sports injuries, headache, carpal tunnel syndrome, whiplash, pain associated with diabetes, pain associated with

cancer, arthritis-related pain, or pain after trauma or surgery. How do UC Irvine specialists tackle chronic pain? The process begins with a medical history, physical exam and detailed pain assessment. The team—anesthesiologists, neurologists, psychologists, acupuncturists and physical medicine and rehabilitation physicians—then formulates a multidisciplinary treatment plan. “Each patient has a unique set of physical and psychosocial circumstances,” says Perret. “An approach that involves several specialties is critical for successful outcomes.”

**Banishing pain.** UC Irvine Pain Medicine is the only multidisciplinary outpatient practice in Orange County, offering a complete spectrum of pain management techniques in one location. “Treatment may involve a combination of strategies, with drug therapy playing a key role for many patients,” says physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist **Dr. Justin Hata**, director of the center. Medications—alone or in combination—can be injected, taken orally or delivered through a patch.

“To increase the effectiveness of drugs and decrease their side effects, the medications may be placed directly into the spinal fluid with an implanted pump, which can be operated by the patient,” explains Hata. Called an intrathecal drug delivery system, or “pain pump,” this method requires only a fraction of the medication that would be needed with pills.

For other patients, a nerve block may be the answer. “This involves injecting an anesthetic close to a nerve pathway, which prevents pain messages

from reaching the brain,” says Hata. Another option is spinal cord stimulation. In this procedure, electrodes are implanted close to the spinal cord, producing a tingling sensation that suppresses pain. Radiofrequency ablation, which deadens or alters nerves with a burst of intense energy, may also be a solution for some patients. And for those with distressing musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis, anesthetic or anti-inflammatory injections into painful joints and trigger points can help. “If patients suffer from pain that starts in the back and shoots down the leg or arm, it may be due to spinal nerve compression,” says Hata. “In these cases, injections of steroids into the space surrounding the spinal cord can go a long way to control discomfort.” The Pain Medicine practice has two procedure rooms, as well as a five-bed recovery area for patients who have had certain treatments.

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Physical therapy, acupuncture and psychological counseling are often combined with drug therapy and play essential roles in recovery. “Exercise, ultrasound and massage can help alleviate chronic pain,” says Perret. “And acupuncture can increase the release of chemicals called endorphins that block pain. At the same time, counseling can help reverse some of the effects of pain, while reducing depression and increasing the patient’s sense of control—two major issues for chronic pain patients.”

The UC Irvine Pain Medicine practice is one of several new initiatives spearheaded by the Department of Anesthesiology & Perioperative Care, which also has developed a class to help prepare patients to lessen the stress of surgery (see *Preparing for Surgery—Mind, Body, Spirit* class listing on page 6). For more information or referral to a pain management specialist, call 949.824.7246.

