Avoiding opioids in treating pain

By Paige McLaughlin

How can I manage my back and neck pain without opioid medications?

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During their lifetime, more than 60 percent of adults will experience back pain and more than 40 percent will experience neck pain that interferes with daily activities. Some back and neck pain conditions may be acute, and many believe that they have no hope for relief other than opioid medications that is increasingly subject to prescribing limits due to the opioid epidemic. Fortunately, there are other options to effectively manage or treat back and neck pain from lifestyle changes to alternative therapies to more traditional medical approaches. The key to overcoming chronic pain is to recognize it early and begin treatment. Many people attempt to power through, thinking the pain will subside. But what may have started as acute pain from an injury can easily evolve into persistent chronic pain, requiring advanced therapies and treatments. Because everyone experiences pain differently, you should work with your doctor to create a customized treatment plan. Strained muscles or ligaments, excess weight, poor posture, stress, genetics, and the wear and tear of daily activities can all contribute to back or neck pain. If you are experiencing this kind of pain, first consider some of the following approaches:

Physical therapy. Over time, regular physical therapy can help strengthen muscles, improve function, and reduce pain from pain or injury. Acoustic neuromodulation may be beneficial for patients with chronic pain and may improve, among other things, body mechanics, posture, and flexibility.

Nerve stimulation therapy. Acupuncture and transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) can help relieve chronic pain. TENS uses a small, battery-powered machine to block or “annul” electrical pain signals at the source.

Strength and flexibility exercises. Yoga and tai chi can be highly effective, noninvasive options for pain management. These activities emphasize slow and soft movements — perfect for chronic pain sufferers — to increase mobility and function.

Lifestyle modifications. Redefine your daily routine. Exercise regularly and incorporate gentle, natural stretching into your day, especially if you work in an office. Eat foods with anti-inflammatory properties that can reduce stiffness in your back and neck, such as leafy greens, cherries, blueberries, whole grains, and fish. Lastly, address the psychological or stress-related factors potentially contributing to your pain. Practice meditation or other mind-body strategies typically.

If you have been prescribed opioids or other medication that you believe necessary to treat your back and neck pain, consider the more than 200 nonopioid drug options available. Anti-inflammatory and anti-depressant medications can work to block the electrical pain receptors in your brain. Your doctor may also recommend more advanced treatments, such as anti-inflammatory injections, epidural injections, and electrical spinal cord stimulation, which can help reduce or block back pain at its source. Secure back or neck pain sometimes can be treated with surgery; however, there are many treatment options that can be tried before surgery need to be considered. Talk to your doctor to identify the causes of your pain and work together to create a treatment plan.

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