

Living with a Chronic Health Condition



Learning you have a chronic disease can be frightening. Depending on what it is and the treatment options available, you may feel panicked or unsure of what to do next. But learning about your condition and doing your best to manage it can help you live a less fearful and more enjoyable life.

Understanding Chronic Conditions

Unlike acute illnesses such as sore throats, a cold or the flu, which are largely treatable and short in duration, chronic conditions can last for months, years or a lifetime. Diseases such as arthritis, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, hepatitis C, AIDS and certain cancers are some familiar chronic illnesses. Some lesser known ones include chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome and Parkinson's disease. How a chronic illness affects a person depends on the illness, how severe or advanced it is and how he or she responds to treatment. The course of a chronic illness also can be affected by heredity, age, stress, diet, exercise and the person's mental state.

Coping tools

The following suggestions can help you cope with a chronic condition.

- **Understand your illness.** Learning about your condition can reduce fear and help you feel more in control of your condition and your life. Information sources include your doctor or national organizations, such as the American Heart Association, the American Diabetes Association and the American Lung Association.
- **Play an active role in your health care.** Unlike many acute conditions that can be cured by simply taking antibiotics or having surgery, most chronic illnesses require daily monitoring of symptoms. For example, if you have asthma, you'll have to measure your peak flow regularly. Knowing how to manage your condition daily and what steps to take in emergencies will help you stay aware and involved.
- **Make changes to your lifestyle, as needed.** If you have an illness such as cancer, for example, the disease and your treatments can cause fatigue. By pacing your daily activities and getting enough sleep and rest, you'll feel better every day.

- **Eat the right kinds of food.** Depending on your illness, you may need to avoid some types of food or add others to your diet. Eating a healthy diet with moderate portions also can help you lose weight if you need to, or maintain a healthy weight, which may reduce some of your symptoms and your risk for complications if you have diabetes or heart disease.
- **Exercise appropriately.** Physical activity can help you manage many chronic illnesses. Ask your doctor what kind of exercise you should do and for how long each day if you have arthritis, heart disease or diabetes. Regular workouts can also improve your strength and endurance and can help reduce the anxiety and depression that sometime accompany chronic conditions.
- **Follow your treatment plan.** If you have asthma, diabetes, Parkinson's, HIV or other conditions, you may have a complicated treatment plan. Following the plan as closely as possible will help you manage your symptoms and your disease.

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- **Take all medications according to your doctor's instructions.** Many people with chronic conditions may need to take multiple medications. Falling behind on doses, double dosing or taking certain drugs with alcohol or some foods can be dangerous. Be sure to follow any warnings on drug labels. Call your doctor if you have questions or an unusual reaction to a medication.
- **Stay informed.** Treatments, medications and recommendations for your condition may change, so it's important to stay up to date. Being connected to a support group or joining an e-mail newsgroup for people with your condition are two ways to stay current. If you learn about a new treatment, don't change your plan without first talking with your doctor.
- **Keep a health journal.** Keep track of your treatment plan, maintain a list of medications you take and jot down any questions as they arise. You also should record any changes in symptoms and possible triggers. Share your notes with your doctor at your next appointment.
- **Maintain normal activities as best you can.** If your illness hinders your ability to do things you enjoy, talk with your doctor about possible ways to stay independent.
- **Talk openly with family and friends.** Letting those who are close to you know what you're dealing with physically and emotionally can help them provide assistance and support when you need it.
- **Be aware of your feelings.** People with chronic conditions often feel anger, confusion, fear and anxiety. Stress is also common due to the added pressures of coping with the uncertainties of the conditions. If you feel overwhelmed or have trouble coping with your emotions, seek help from a mental health professional. He or she can teach you coping skills, relaxation exercises and practices that can help you live in the moment instead of worrying about the future.
- **Keep your perspective.** If you've just been diagnosed with a chronic illness or have had a relapse or setback, it's easy for your health condition to become the focus of your life. Reminding yourself that your condition is only part of who you are and what you do can help you regain your balance.

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