

Acute Pain and Chronic Pain: Understanding the Differences

"Acute pain" and "chronic pain" are terms that don't mean the same thing in everyday use, and in medical language.

If you ask a member of the public, they will often say that acute pain means that it feels sharp and stabbing, and that chronic pain means that the pain is very bad, or severe.

Health care professionals use the terms differently: acute pain means new pain, and chronic pain means "old" pain, lasting more than three months.

Here are some of the differences between acute pain and chronic pain. It can be helpful to understand these differences, especially if you live with chronic (persistent) pain.

Acute pain = new pain	Chronic pain = old, persistent pain, lasting more than three months
Often a sign of damage	Rarely ongoing damage
Usually a helpful warning sign	Usually unhelpful
Warns us to withdraw from danger	Usually nothing dangerous happening
Warns us to seek treatment (first aid)	Treatment often has a more limited role
Rest helps in the early stages, if the tissues are damaged	Too much rest leads to weakened tissues
Nervous system operating normally	Nervous system may be creating unhelpful messages
This is what the pain system is designed for	Often an unhelpful aspect of the pain system: warning messages may not switch off as they should.

Question: What might happen if somebody carries on treating a persistent, chronic pain problem as if it was an acute pain?