

Living well with chronic pain in later life

Chronic pain is common in older people, and can be disabling and reduce quality of life.

But... some people with chronic pain describe their health as good and remain active. Chronic pain does not interfere with their lives.

"I still like to be physical. I like to keep myself moving all the time, and I'm finding that, you know, I can't go and play football. I can't go and do a one-hundred-yard sprint or whatever nowadays, so just a walk round the fields and back, for a couple of hours is my alternative. . . . I can carry on walking forever"



There is a lot of interest in looking at the ways people actively maintain health and overcome restrictions. This is called 'salutogenesis' - the production of health.

We focus here on the idea of people **'beating the odds'** in their experience of living with pain.

METHODS OF THE STUDY*

We surveyed adults aged 50 years and over at 3 time points: baseline, 3 years and 6 years.

We identified 2 groups of people reporting pain:

- 1) people who reported pain that interfered with everyday life at all 3 time points
- 2) people who reported pain that did not interfere with everyday life at any of the 3 time points

We then performed statistical analysis, and carried out interviews to compare the 2 groups.

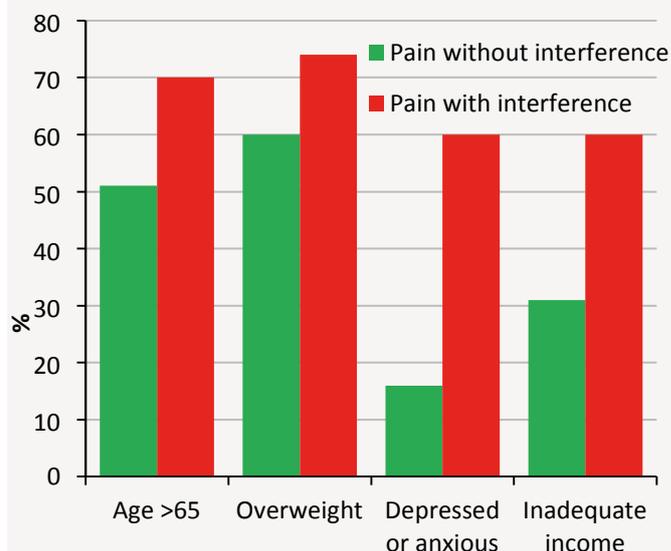
*Full details are in the publications referenced at the end of this bulletin.

Was the difference in extent of interference in daily life from chronic pain simply because those with no interference had less pain?

No. Pain with no interference can be a long-term state, and can involve high levels of pain medication and widespread pain.

Were there other differences between people with interfering pain and people whose pain did not interfere with their lives?

There were some general differences. People who had pain that did not interfere with their lives were less likely to report depression or anxiety, be overweight, or report inadequate income, and they were younger (see figure).



Do these differences completely explain why for some people pain does not interfere with life?

No. Some people were unexpectedly 'beating the odds'. That is they had features (such as widespread pain, obesity, older age) associated with interfering pain, but reported that pain did not interfere with their lives.

What was different about those people with chronic pain who were ‘beating the odds’ and avoiding pain interference in their lives?

People who were ‘beating the odds’ on pain interference were more likely to be:

- involved in social activity
- involved in physical activity
- active participants in life

The key to living well with chronic pain was being physically and socially active (within their capabilities) in an everyday context, and being involved in life.

People who were ‘beating the odds’ also had:

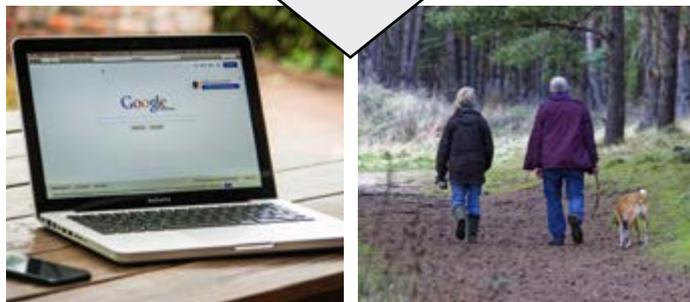
- a flexible attitude
- an ability to adapt their activities

This ability to **adapt** is illustrated by the quotation below about gardening, a key and lifelong interest for many people that is an example of **physical activity and involvement**, and is often a **social activity** too.

“I have to do a little bit less gardening because before now I’ve always set my own seeds, raked out and done, but now I buy my seedlings from the garden centres and carry on from there.”



“And I think for our own sake we have to be involved because being involved is one of the key things to ... making us a whole person really. You can’t opt out of the world. You’ve got to be part and parcel of it... And so I think involvement is absolutely vital. But involvement within your capabilities”



Clinical implications:

- ◆ Social activity, physical activity and involvement in life are key to reducing the interference from pain
- ◆ The extent of interference of pain in everyday life can be different, even for individuals with the same level of pain
- ◆ Older people can live and feel well with chronic pain. Acknowledging this idea is important in supporting them to do so

Implications for commissioners and local authorities:

- There is a need for public health interventions to encourage social and physical activity and involvement in life
- Policy makers need to consider ways to resource this engagement
- Patients and professional leaders in health and social care need to highlight and promote the value that activity and social involvement adds to medical management of chronic pain

References

- Jordan KP, Sim J, Moore A, Bernard M, Richardson J. **Distinctiveness of long-term pain that does not interfere with life: an observational cohort study.** *E J Pain*, 2012;16:1185-1194.
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- Richardson JC, Moore AJ, Bernard M, Jordan KP, Sim J. **Living Well With Chronic Pain in Later Life: The Role and Meaning of Activity and Involvement.** *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 2015;39(3):200-213.