

Your important health information

Making sense of persistent pelvic pain

What is persistent pelvic pain?

We use the term 'persistent pelvic pain' to describe pain in the region between the belly button and the top of the legs that has been present for many months or years. The pain may be in many places at once, including the tummy, pelvis, back, legs or buttocks and may affect mood, energy levels and sleep.

Persistent pelvic pain can limit your ability to participate in school, work, sport and relationships.

How did my pain start?

Persistent pelvic pain can be triggered by trauma, a medical concern (such as endometriosis or urinary tract infections), surgery or childbirth. Sometimes there seems to be no obvious explanation at all. In persistent pelvic pain, the pain can persist even after the affected tissues have healed and the problem treated.

Why should I learn about pain?

We know that understanding pain can help you to look at your pain differently. It can make the pain less scary, change the meaning of the pain and help you to hurt less. Changing your beliefs about pain can help you get back to activities that you enjoy.

Helpful facts

- You are not alone.
- In Australia up to one in five women may experience persistent pelvic pain.
- Pain is always real. You can't imagine pain.
- Pain is essential for survival and not always bad. It makes you stop and pay attention and protect yourself.
- You can have pain without damage to the body, or when damage or disease has healed.
- If you have experienced pain for a long time, the pain system becomes overprotective and sensitive.

How does my pain system become overprotective?

In the body we have nerve endings which are 'danger detectors'. These detectors let the brain know when there are changes in temperature, chemical changes or pressure that you might need to pay attention to. It is essential for your pain system to alert you when you touch a hot plate or step on broken glass.

The brain has to make sense of the information from your 'danger detectors', combined with existing thoughts, beliefs and your past experiences. After processing all this information, it is the brain (not the 'danger detectors') that decides you are in danger and that you need protection. This is when you will experience pain.

Most of the time the pain system works very well to protect you. However when you have persistent pain, nerve cells (neurons) in the brain, spinal cord and pelvis actually change and become more sensitive over time.

Understanding your overprotective pain system

Imagine your pain system like a 'smoke alarm' that alerts you to danger.

It is essential for your smoke alarm to alert you when there is smoke in your house which may be dangerous to you. Over time your smoke alarm becomes more sensitive and warns you there may be danger with the slightest sign of smoke. It is not essential or useful for your smoke alarm to respond every time you turn on the shower or toaster.

So when you have persistent pelvic pain your pain system alerts you often, with the slightest change. It is not useful for your pain system to alert you every time you do everyday activities.

Your pain system keeps practising making pain, and when you practice doing something, you get better at it. Your pain system becomes extremely good at producing pain. This explains why gentle touching or doing normal activities that are not harmful may become painful. This is a sign your pain system has become overprotective.

The great news is that your brain can change itself and your overprotective pain system can change itself. With treatment over time you can reset your 'smoke alarm'.

What can I do to help my overprotective pain system?

There are many ways to address pelvic pain. It takes time, patience, understanding and persistence. Your physio will work with you to find the right tools for you. Taking charge of your own recovery and doing things for yourself are the most effective.

Things that we know can help include:

- understanding that pain does not equal damage
- knowing you are safe to move
- participating in exercise you enjoy. The brain can produce pain relieving chemicals during exercise
- doing things that bring you joy and give your life meaning can be pain relieving
- relaxation, calm breathing techniques, meditation and mindfulness
- taking care of yourself such as managing stress, eating well and getting enough sleep.

How you can find out more about pain

- Talk to your physiotherapist at Mercy Health.
- Watch the TEDx talk *Why Things Hurt* by Lorimer Mosley.
- Explore the *Tame the Beast* website.
- Read *Explain Pain* book by Butler and Mosley. You can borrow this from a public library.
- Use the *Protectometer Book* or App by Butler and Mosley.
- Explore the Pelvic Pain Foundation of Australia and Pain Australia websites

Further Information

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact:

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