

Understanding Pain

Pain is a normal human experience that is necessary for survival. In recent years, researchers have made great strides in understanding pain. It is now known that the nervous system is the primary contributor to pain, not injured tissues. In normal function, nerves throughout the body send messages to the spinal cord, which then sends messages to the brain for analysis. When a threat is present, nerves send danger messages to the brain. The brain then interprets the messages and decides whether or not something actually is a threat and whether or not a person will experience pain.

Nerves become excited when they send messages to the brain. Normally, excited nerves calm back down. Problems may arise if nerves remain excited rather than calming back down to their resting state. Pain is not the only thing that can increase the excitability of nerves. Emotional stress, fear, cold temperature, being sick, and decreased blood flow can all increase nerve excitability and sensitivity.

When nerves remain sensitive, nonthreatening activities that are performed every day, like sitting, standing, and reaching, may become painful. Some people may even develop chronic pain, which is persistent pain due to a sensitive nervous system. Chronic pain lasts longer than the normal expected time for tissues to heal, which is typically 3-6 months. This means chronic pain is not usually related to tissue injury; it is simply the result of an over-sensitive nervous system.

Treating chronic pain involves decreasing the sensitivity of the nervous system. This can be done in a variety of ways. First, research suggests that learning about pain and understanding pain can actually help decrease pain. Second, engaging in aerobic exercise can help increase blood flow and oxygen delivery to tissues, which can help decrease sensitivity. Third, getting sufficient sleep is linked to decreased levels of pain. Finally, consulting with a health care professional for expert advice on pain management can expedite recovery from pain.

Remember, experiencing pain is normal, but living with pain is not. Because pain is individualized, treatment of chronic pain may be difficult. As understanding of pain improves, treatment becomes more successful.

References:

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