

Words About Wellness

Treating your Pain Without Drugs

Chronic pain is difficult for both patients and providers. Medications for chronic pain are incompletely effective and are associated with unacceptable adverse effects. For example, non-steroidal analgesic agents such as ibuprofen carry risks of gastrointestinal bleeding and acetaminophen overuse is associated with liver damage. More recently, the problems associated with overuse of opioids has been labeled an epidemic. However, beyond opioid use disorder, even judicious use of opioids is associated with serious side effects, particularly for older adults: falls, debilitating constipation, often with associated urinary tract infection, and tactile hypersensitivity. So what can we use safely for ourselves and for our patients to treat pain?

The United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) recently released a Comparative Effectiveness Review of the evidence for non-pharmacologic therapies in chronic pain conditions. A summary of these findings is presented for you here in our January newsletters. You can read the full report here: [Noninvasive Nonpharmacological Treatment for Chronic Pain: A Systematic Review](#)

AHRQ defined the strength of evidence as low and moderate based on the quality of the research studies. They broke down responses into short term (≤ 3 months), intermediate term (>3 to <6 months), and long-term benefits (6-12 months). Data are presented for chronic low back pain first.

Table 1. Strength of evidence/magnitude of effect for improving FUNCTION in chronic low back pain

Modality	Short-term	Intermediate-term	Long-term
Massage	Moderate/small	Low/ small	No data
Yoga	Moderate/ small	Low/none	No data
Psychotherapies	Moderate/ small	Moderate/slight	Moderate/ small
Exercise	Low/ small	Low/none	Low/none
Acupuncture	Low/ small	Low/none	Low/none
Spinal manipulation	Low/ small	Low/ small	No data
Multidisciplinary rehab	Low/ small	Low/ small	Low/ none
Mindfulness training	Low/none	Low/none	Low/none
Low-level laser	Low/ small	Low/none	No data

Table 2. Strength of evidence/magnitude of effect for improving PAIN in chronic low back pain

Modality	Short-term	Intermediate-term	Long-term
Massage	Moderate/ small	Low/none	No data
Yoga	Moderate/ small	Moderate/medium	No data
Psychotherapies	Moderate/ small	Moderate/ small	Moderate/ small
Exercise	Moderate/ small	Low/ medium	Low/ medium
Acupuncture	Moderate/ small	Low/none	Low/slight
Spinal manipulation	Low/none	Moderate/ small	No data
Multidisciplinary rehab	Moderate/ small	Moderate/ small	Low/slight
Mindfulness training	Moderate/ small	Low/ small	Low/none
Low-level laser	Low/medium	Low/none	No data

Our government is actively supporting research initiatives to investigate non-pharmacologic approaches to pain management. Fortunately, this is what our department does best!