

Physical Therapy:

A holistic approach to Chronic Pain

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Irish Association of Physical Therapists

www.iapt.ie

Physical therapy is a holistic and patient-centred approach focusing on the manual treatment of the soft tissue - muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia. Therapists use highly skilled, hands-on techniques to diagnose, prevent or treat underlying conditions and problems. It is based on health science principles and works alongside other health care practices.

Physical therapists work with many people suffering from chronic pain (CP). Causes can include: postural misalignment and muscular imbalances, degenerative joint disease, fibromyalgia, cumulative trauma disorders, multiple sclerosis and many other disorders affecting the musculoskeletal system or neuromuscular system.

CP such as back pain, neck pain and headaches can often be caused by postural misalignment. Any deviance from ideal alignment creates gravitational force that pulls on the body at an angle and places strain on muscles; the greater the deviation, the greater the strain.

One of our therapists recently met with Mark, an office manager who presented with chronic headaches and blurred vision. Mark had other medical conditions, but the physical therapist working closely with his GP concluded that the headaches and blurred vision were consistent with trigger points in the sternocleidomastoid muscles at the front of the neck. The shortened position of this muscle gave Mark a very forward head posture that could have resulted in worse

problems if left untreated. On questioning, it was discovered that Mark has always slept propped up high on two pillows, causing shortening of these muscles. Physical therapy including soft tissue techniques, postural re-education and correction of sleeping position completely alleviated Mark's symptoms and taught him how to prevent future pain and problems.

Many people with CP believe that they have to live with it, but persistent pain should never be ignored as it could signal disease or injury that will worsen if left untreated.

Physical therapists treat sufferers of CP by firstly taking an approach that looks at the whole body to determine the original source of the problem. The clients' needs are established by a clinical process involving them, their therapist and their medical care team where necessary. This entails a detailed analysis of findings, determined through extensive history-taking and whole-body musculoskeletal assessment. Physical therapy integrates a wide variety of advanced soft tissue and articular (joints) techniques, which restore optimal and pain free function. These include massage-based techniques, trigger point therapy, muscle stretching and strengthening, and ongoing home care program designed specifically for the client.

You can find a physical therapist in your area by logging on to The Irish Association of Physical Therapists (IAPT) website at: www.iapt.ie.