



Approximately 50 million Americans live with chronic pain, according to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and many of those suffering have served in the armed forces. The National Health Interview Survey found that military veterans are more likely to experience chronic pain than people who've never worn the uniform.

Pain can take many forms: sharp, dull, strong, mild, intermittent, constant. Acute pain is sudden, usually brought on by illness, injury or surgery. With time, it resolves. Chronic pain is the result of increased sensitivity of the nerves. And it can be unrelenting in terms of frequency and severity. Chronic pain may even lead to anxiety, depression, and a reduced quality of life.

According to the CDC, many people rely on prescription medications to manage their pain. I did, after getting injured in the military I spent some time recuperating but once back on the job, I was still hurting. There were many days I'd wake up, take medication to mask the pain, and then push through the day. Other mission-related injuries exacerbated the pain. I was taking "ranger candy" (800 mg ibuprofen) three times a day, every day. Whenever I exhausted a prescription I would go in to see a doctor and since it seemed "my doctor" changed from one appointment to another I was never questioned just given another year's worth of scripts. I also developed the habit of taking extra strength acetaminophen (or acetaminophen arthritis strength) and then four hours later ibuprofen. Repeating every four hours.

Moreover, they were ultimately adding to the problem. Let's say my back hurt. I'd take a couple of pills and then, feeling no pain, continue working past the point when I should have stopped. The overexertion would leave me almost completely debilitated for a day or two afterward, when the pain medication wore off. And the body can develop a tolerance to medication over time, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

I've put off surgery because of potential risks, including paralysis and infections. Many years after retiring and well into my second career as a postal employee, I went to the VA for carpal tunnel problems and eventually surgery. At this point it was determined I had been on ibuprofen for over 35 years and my supply got cut off. After recuperating from my surgeries, I approached my doctors about learning how to retrain my brain so that I would not have to take meds and take a different approach to managing my pain. Initially I was given a TENS unit, but you can't use it constantly and there are times it is not practical to wear it. Additionally, I look for other ways to feel better. Active approaches are best for retraining the brain. Physical therapy, yoga, and general exercise are some examples. Diet and lifestyle also affect how our brain perceives pain.

Pain clinics may offer procedures such as trigger-point massage, dry-needling, advanced injections like epidurals and facet blocks, spinal cord stimulation, and acupuncture. These therapies, along with yoga, biofeedback, cognitive behavioral therapy, mind-body techniques, ice or heat, and electrical stimulation modalities (TENS, Alpha-Stim, Calmare, and Inter X) can make a big difference in a pain cycle.

Pain is your body's way of telling you to throttle back. I've learned to listen to and heed that signal. Instead of taking meds and continuing with what I was doing, I stop. The work will still

be there tomorrow. You just pick up and do it in stages, rather than try to knock it all out in one day.

Pain influences people's lives and can affect your mood and stress levels. Finding ways to reduce stress can help treat pain by winding down the nervous system.

Today, I'm not completely pain-free. I'm usually a 6 on the Defense and Veterans Pain Rating Scale, which health care providers use to assess pain intensity as well as how pain impacts daily activities, including work and sleep. A "6" means my pain is difficult to ignore. It can cause me to avoid usual activities, such as sleeping, mowing the lawn, climbing stairs, grocery shopping, exercising, and walking my dogs.

I understand that for some people, it may not be wise or safe to eliminate prescription pain medications altogether. But if you're looking for a lifestyle change – and it is, indeed, a lifestyle change – talk to your health care provider about options for pain management that don't rely on meds. Be open and honest about how you're feeling physically as well as emotionally, and bring your family members in on the conversation as well. You need not be alone in this.

#### DEFENSE AND VETERANS PAIN RATING SCALE:

- 0 = NO PAIN
- 1 = HARDLY NOTICE PAIN
- 2 = NOTICE PAIN, DOES NOT INTERFERE WITH ACTIVITIES
- 3 = SOMETIMES DISTRACTS ME
- 4 = DISTRACTS ME, CAN DO USUAL ACTIVITIES
- 5 = INTERRUPTS SOME ACTIVITIES
- 6 = HARD TO IGNORE, AVOID USUAL ACTIVITIES
- 7 = FOCUS OF ATTENTION, PREVENTS DOING DAILY ACTIVITIES
- 8 = AWFUL, HARD TO DO ANYTHING
- 9 = CAN'T BEAR THE PAIN UNABLE, TO DO ANYTHING
- 10 = AS BAD AS IT COULD BE, NOTHING ELSE MATTERS

Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy New Year, and Happy Holidays from the Grand Knight, her Executive Board and the Past Grand Knights. Please have a safe holiday season and please remember those who are not at home but where ever they may be stationed.

Strength in Unity!

The Voice of the Enlisted

Lady Sunny Wirth

Grand Knight