

6 Pains You Should Never Ignore

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By Barbara Brody | June 6, 2017

Your body is trying to talk to you. Here's when you should always take its call.



pain

Pain isn't always a bad thing. How else would you know to pull away from a hot burner before your hand gets charred or to call it a day at the gym before you seriously injure yourself? But there's a difference between a fleeting "ouch" and sudden agony or chronic discomfort.

After a workout, for instance, it's normal to be a little achy, and that's not necessarily a big deal. "Soreness is common after exercise and can be treated with ice or over-the-counter medications," says Armin Tehrani, M.D., a board-certified orthopedic surgeon in New York. Wait a short while, and you'll probably feel just fine. Same goes for the

occasional headache, mild morning stiffness that quickly dissipates, and a bunch of other familiar complaints.

So how can you tell when your pain has crossed into worrisome territory? The first clue is severity. You probably know that crushing chest pain, the worst headache of your life, or sharp stomach pain that's intensifying warrants a trip to the ER. Other times, it's not so obvious. Here's how to sort it out.

Don't Ignore: Back Pain Accompanied by Other Symptoms

Back pain is exceptionally common, and 90 percent of the time it goes away on its own within six weeks, says Grace Lo, M.D., a rheumatologist and assistant professor at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. If it lasts longer than that, see your doctor. You might need imaging tests to figure out what's going on so you can treat the underlying problem, such as a herniated disc.

It's also important to pay attention to other symptoms that might accompany back pain. "If you have a fever, night sweats, or unintentional weight loss, it's possible that you have a malignancy," says Dr. Lo, who notes that lung, prostate, or breast cancer could cause your back to hurt if it spreads to the spine.

Bladder or bowel incontinence is another red flag. "It might mean that something is impinging or putting pressure on your spinal cord," Dr. Lo says. You'll want to treat that quickly to avoid permanent nerve damage. Same goes for any weakness in your legs: If your legs and feet are unable to bear weight, see a doctor ASAP.

Don't Ignore: Neck Pain That Lasts Longer than a Few Weeks

Who hasn't woken up at some point with a crick in the neck, thanks to sleeping in an uncomfortable position? That's nothing to worry about, and a warm compress and a massage will probably work

wonders. But as with back pain, neck pain that doesn't resolve within a few weeks is worth getting checked out.

It could be arthritis, a disc problem, osteoporosis, or spinal stenosis—a narrowing that could pinch your spinal cord and cause numbness or weakness in your fingers, Dr. Lo says. And if fever, night sweats, or unintentional weight loss accompanies your neck pain, you'll definitely need to see a physician.

Don't Ignore: Wrist Pain That Spreads to the Hand

You might have strained yourself from too much typing and texting, but if the joints in your wrists or hands are painful and difficult to move, arthritis could be to blame. Osteoarthritis—the “wear and tear” kind—is especially common, and it tends to worsen with age. But the symptoms tend to progress very slowly and can usually be managed with pain relievers.

Rheumatoid arthritis—a less common but often more serious autoimmune version of arthritis—tends to start in the wrists and hands before eventually impacting other joints throughout the body.

Rheumatoid arthritis onset often occurs in one of two stages. “Symptoms usually start when you're in your 30s or in your 60s,” Dr. Lo says. It worsens quickly—think months instead of years—but there are medications you can take to slow down the disease's progression. If your fingers, knuckles, or wrists are suddenly painful or your morning stiffness lasts for an hour or more, see a doctor.

Don't Ignore: Knee Pain When You Walk

There are many possible causes, but osteoarthritis is often the problem, Dr. Lo says. That's not necessarily serious, but untreated osteoarthritis can lead to disability, so the sooner you address it the better.

If your knee pain is seriously uncomfortable or it's interfering with your ability to function, tell your doctor—and don't be afraid to ask for a referral to a physical therapist. “PT can be very helpful for osteoarthritis in terms of improving range of motion and strengthening the surrounding muscles,” Dr. Lo says.

Another possibility is bursitis, an inflammation of the fluid-filled sac around the knee. Or maybe the issue isn't even the knee itself. For example, if you have flat feet, it could put extra stress on your knees. Your doctor may recommend orthotics, such as shoe inserts. Whatever the cause, if your knee pain has lasted more than one month, Dr. Tehrani says an expert should evaluate you.

Don't Ignore: Hip Pain When You Lift Your Leg

There are lots of reasons why your hip might ache. Some possibilities include inflammation around the joint, osteoarthritis in the joint, or even a cancer that's spread to that area, Dr. Lo says. She also warns that it's possible to break your hip and not know it. “If you have osteoporosis, it might only take a little trauma to fracture it,” she explains. “You don't even need to fall. You might just trip and land hard on one leg.”

If that happens and you hear a snap, it's painful to lift your leg, or you can no longer bear weight on that side, get help immediately. Not only do you have to worry about preserving your mobility, but a hip fracture may cause a blood clot in a vein to flake off and travel to your lungs, which could be

fatal if it's not caught in time. "The mortality rate related to hip fracture, especially if it goes untreated, is very high," Dr. Lo says.

Don't Ignore: Sudden and Severe Pain in Your Big Toe

Sometimes you can see exactly what's making you ache, whether it's a bunion, hammertoes, or a cocked-up big toe. You can also develop osteoarthritis in your feet. None of these problems are emergencies, but they can be uncomfortable and are worth making an appointment with your doctor or a podiatrist.

Gout, on the other hand, is something you'll want to treat right away. A type of inflammatory arthritis, it's caused by a buildup of uric acid crystals in the blood—and it becomes more common as you get older. "If you suddenly have severe swelling and pain in your big toe to the point that a bed sheet touching your foot is incredibly painful, then see your primary care doctor," Dr. Lo says. You'll probably need medication to treat the gout attack and possibly a different prescription to prevent the problem from recurring

Still Not Sure?

Whatever's bothering you, when in doubt, get it checked out. "People should not assume that it's normal to have more pain just because they're getting older," Dr. Lo says. "There's usually a reason why you're in pain and something that can be done to make it better."

Checking with your doctor can help you get the right diagnosis and treatment. To make a conversation with your doctor easier, jot down your symptoms:

- Where you are experiencing the pain
- When the pain started and how often it occurs
- Any other symptoms you are experiencing

Bring these notes along with a list of all your medications to your appointment.

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