
Chronic illness

Summary

- A chronic illness is stressful.
 - Stress can affect your recovery and the way you cope with the illness and its treatment.
 - There are things you can do to help you come to terms with the new direction your life has taken.
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A chronic or long-term illness means having to adjust to the demands of the illness and the therapy used to treat the condition. There may be additional stresses, since chronic illness might change the way you live, see yourself and relate to others.

Characteristics of a chronic illness

Chronic illnesses are mostly characterised by:

- complex causes
- many risk factors
- long latency periods (time between onset of the illness and feeling its effects)
- a long illness
- functional impairment or disability.

Most chronic illnesses do not fix themselves and are generally not cured completely. Some can be immediately life-threatening, such as heart disease and stroke. Others linger over time and need intensive management, such as diabetes. Most chronic illnesses persist throughout a person's life, but are not always the cause of death, such as arthritis.

Common chronic illnesses

While many illnesses can be considered chronic, there are 12 major chronic conditions that are a significant burden in terms of morbidity, mortality and healthcare costs in Australia, including:

- heart disease
- stroke
- lung cancer
- colorectal cancer
- depression
- type 2 diabetes
- arthritis
- osteoporosis
- asthma
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- chronic kidney disease
- oral disease.

Common stresses of chronic illness

Chronic or long-term illness and its treatment pose special problems. You need to learn how to:

- live with the physical effects of the illness

- deal with the treatments
- make sure there is clear communication with doctors
- maintain emotional balance to cope with negative feelings
- maintain confidence and a positive self-image.

Additional demands of chronic illness

As well as needing to find ways to deal with the stress involved with chronic illness, you also need to:

- understand the condition
- know about the treatment and therapy
- maintain trust and confidence in the doctors, especially when recovery isn't possible
- know how to control the symptoms
- maintain social relationships when faced with an uncertain medical future or when symptoms arise
- avoid social isolation.

Type of help available for chronic illness

Dealing with the stresses of chronic illness can be demanding and it puts extra pressure on you. It is important you speak to your doctor or healthcare provider about your feelings and how effectively you think you are coping with the illness and its treatment.

Ways to cope with chronic illness

There is a range of ways to deal with the stress of chronic illness. These include:

- finding information – this can help if you feel helpless or out of control
- emotional support from others – particularly family and friends, this can be a source of great help
- joining a well facilitated support group
- setting concrete, short-term goals – to restore certainty, power and control
- thinking about possible outcomes – discussing them with the doctor can help you to face them before they become a reality.

The overall aim of these strategies is to help put your illness into context and give some meaning to what is happening.

Children with a chronic illness

For children with a chronic illness, there are programs and opportunities for funding support attached to government, Catholic and independent sector schools. If your child has a chronic illness, speak to your school principal for help developing a health support plan and applying for programs or funding support for your child.

Raising Children Network also has information about **support groups for teenagers with chronic illness**, or visit **livewire** – the online community for teens living with a chronic illness or a disability.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your child's school
- Support groups
- **Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria)** Tel. (03) 9826 1422
- **ReachOut**

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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