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.

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

References


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Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

• talk to your doctor or pharmacist
• dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
• ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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More information

Health checks

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Health checks explained
- Life expectancy
- Monitoring your health
- Health checks throughout life
- Medical tests and assessment
- Staying healthy and well

Health checks explained

- Cancer screening
  The aim of cancer screening is to find cancer in its early stages...
- Health checks for men
  Men should see their doctor for regular medical check-ups...
- Health checks for women
  A woman at high risk of a particular disease should be checked more frequently and/or at an earlier age...
- Regular health checks
  Regular health checks can help you identify any early signs of health issues...

Life expectancy
Life expectancy for Victorians
Reducing risk factors will improve the health of Victorians more than developing cures for diseases.

Reduce your risk of early death
You can dramatically reduce your risk of early death by making a few simple lifestyle changes.

Monitoring your health

Talking with your doctor
To get the most out of the conversation with your doctor, nurse or other healthcare provider, it is best to be open about providing information and to speak up if you don’t understand.

Blood pressure
Healthy eating and lifestyle changes can help to manage high blood pressure.

Bowel cancer screening
The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBSCP) offers kits for free to Australians between the ages of 50 and 74 years of age.

Breast awareness
Women should become familiar with the normal look, feel and shape of their breasts, so they will notice any abnormal changes.

Cancer screening
The aim of cancer screening is to find cancer in its early stages.

Cervical screening tests
The cervical screening test protects up to 30 per cent more women than the Pap test.

Chronic illness
A chronic or long term illness means the person has to adjust to the demands of the illness and the therapy used to treat the condition.

Eye tests
Regular eye tests or check-ups detect problems early, so you can have early treatment to minimise any permanent damage to your eyes.

Hearing tests
A ringing sensation in the ears (tinnitus), or people complaining that you talk too loudly are signs you may need to have your hearing checked.

Heart disease and stroke - your risk score
Absolute risk is a measure your doctor can calculate to understand the likelihood of you experiencing a heart attack or stroke in the next five years.

Heart disease - know your risk
Risk factors for heart disease include smoking, diabetes, obesity, family history and age.

How to check for skin cancer
Six common questions on checking for skin cancer.

Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need
Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation.

Preparing for a health or medical appointment
Get the most out of your consultation by preparing for your health or medical appointment.

Reduce your risk of early death
You can dramatically reduce your risk of early death by making a few simple lifestyle changes.

Regular health checks
Regular health checks can help you identify any early signs of health issues.

Stroke risk factors and prevention
Everyone can reduce their risk of having a stroke by making a few simple lifestyle changes.

Testicular self examination
Men with an increased risk of testicular cancer should regularly examine their testicles for unusual lumps or swellings.
- Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men

Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), we...

Health checks throughout life

- Dental checks for young children
  
  Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two.

- Health check
  
  This health assessment questionnaire will identify which zones of your lifestyle are contributing to your personal health risk and provide actions you can take to make positive change.

- Health checks for men
  
  Men should see their doctor for regular medical check-ups.

- Health checks for women
  
  A woman at high risk of a particular disease should be checked more frequently and/or at an earlier age.

- Men's health checks (video)
  
  Many men put off going to the doctor, including nutritionist, Shane Bilsborough.

- Newborn bloodspot screening
  
  Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk of rare, but serious, medical conditions.

- Tests, scans and checks - pregnancy and labour
  
  Tests can confirm your pregnancy and also monitor your baby's development in the womb.

Medical tests and assessment

- Allergy testing
  
  Allergy testing is used to find which substances provoke an allergic reaction.

- Bowel cancer screening
  
  The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) offers kits for free to Australians between the ages of 50 and 74 years of age.

- Breast screening
  
  A breast x-ray or mammogram every two years is recommended for women aged 50 to 69.

- Cervical screening tests
  
  The cervical screening test protects up to 30 per cent more women than the Pap test.

- ECG test
  
  A doctor may recommend an electrocardiogram for patients who may be at risk of heart disease because of family history, smoking, overweight, diabetes or other conditions.

- Eye tests
  
  Regular eye tests or check-ups detect problems early, so you can have early treatment to minimise any permanent damage to your eyes.

- Genetic testing for inherited cancer
  
  A predisposition to certain cancers can be inherited via altered genes.

- Hearing tests
  
  A ringing sensation in the ears (tinnitus), or people complaining that you talk too loudly are signs you may need to have your hearing checked.

Staying healthy and well

- 3 steps to better health (video)
  
  Ways to improve your understanding of your health.

- Heart disease and stroke - your risk score
  
  Absolute risk is a measure your doctor can calculate to understand the likelihood of you experiencing a heart attack or stroke in the next five years.
Managing your health

You can manage your health by learning about healthy living, taking steps to prevent disease and having regular health checks with your doctor.

Talking with your doctor

To get the most out of the conversation with your doctor, nurse or other healthcare provider, it is best to be open about providing information and to speak up if you don’t understand.

Related Information

- Body mass index calculator for children and teenagers
  This calculator measures body mass index (BMI), which is a measure of body fat. It is only an approximate measure of the best weight for your health. The calculator can be used for anyone from two to...

- Arthritis
  Arthritis occurs when joints or muscles become painful, stiff and swollen. Exercise, medication and supportive therapies can help manage symptoms.

- Pain and pain management – adults
  Always see your doctor if you have ongoing pain to find the best pain-management option for you.

- Illness - tips to help you recover
  Improving your lifestyle can relieve the symptoms of illness or injury and improve recovery.

- Emergency department - what to expect
  You are treated as soon as possible in an emergency department, but someone who arrived after you may be seen earlier if necessary.

Home

Related information on other websites

- Chronic Illness Peer Support (ChIPS) – Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne.
- Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria).

Content Partner

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