Chronic or degenerative conditions

Summary

- A chronic condition is one that has been present for six months or longer.
- Not all chronic conditions will lead to disability.
- Care options will depend on the type and severity of your condition
- Ask your doctor about setting up a chronic disease management plan

A chronic condition is one that has been present for six months or longer. Not all chronic conditions will lead to disability. However, there are a number of chronic or degenerative conditions that can have a significant effect on a person’s ability to get around and take care of themselves. Common chronic and degenerative conditions that can lead to disability include:

- multiple sclerosis
- arthritis
- Parkinson’s disease
- muscular dystrophy
- Huntington’s disease.

If you or someone you are caring for has a chronic or degenerative condition, you may need to make some changes to make life easier.

These might include:

- making modifications around the home to make everyday tasks simpler
- moving closer to family
- purchasing speech and mobility aids
- planning for a future where you have limited mobility.

How much care you need will depend on the type and severity of your condition. Some serious degenerative conditions will mean that you eventually require a high level of care, while others can be managed through help in the home or through regular visits to healthcare professionals.

Ask your doctor about setting up a chronic disease management plan. This means that your doctor can plan and coordinate your care with a multidisciplinary team, which includes two or more healthcare professionals, such as a physiotherapist, occupational therapist and speech therapist.

This page lists some of the more common degenerative conditions that lead to limited mobility or motor control. Follow the links to find information on diagnosis, treatment and local disability support services.

Arthritis

There are more than 100 different arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions that affect the muscles, bones and joints. Management techniques can include medical treatment and medication, physiotherapy, exercise and self-management techniques.

For more information see Arthritis.

Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease in which inflammation (pain, heat and swelling) affects the joints, particularly the hands, feet and knees and sometimes other organs of the body. Joint stiffness is common, especially in the morning. There is no cure for rheumatoid arthritis but there are effective ways to manage it.
Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a disease of the joints. The two bones of a joint are normally protected by smooth, cushioning material called cartilage. In osteoarthritis, cartilage breaks down, causing pain and stiffness in the joint. Osteoarthritis is one of the most common forms of arthritis.

For more information see Osteoarthritis.

Friedreich ataxia

Friedreich ataxia is a rare inherited disease of the nervous system characterised by the gradual loss of balance, coordination and muscular control. The affected person has increasing difficulty with coordination leading to an unsteady gait and slurred speech, which may look like being drunk to an outsider observer. There is no cure, but some symptoms can be managed with medication and physical therapy.

For more information see Friedreich ataxia.

Huntington's disease

Huntington's disease is a neurological (nervous system) condition caused by an altered gene. The death of brain cells in certain areas of the brain result in a gradual loss of cognitive (thinking), physical and emotional function. Symptoms can appear when the person is in their thirties or forties. The most common symptom is jerky movements of the arms and legs (called 'chorea'). A person with Huntington's disease may also have difficulties with speech, swallowing and concentration.

For more information see Huntington's disease.

Kennedy's disease

Kennedy's disease is a rare inherited neuromuscular disorder that causes progressive weakening and wasting of the muscles, particularly the arms and legs. Kennedy's disease is also known as X-linked spinal bulbar muscular atrophy (SBMA). The disorder only affects men. There is no cure yet, and treatment can only ease some of the symptoms.

For more information see Kennedy's disease.

Marfan syndrome

Marfan syndrome is caused by a faulty gene that affects connective tissue. It can affect the skeletal, cardiovascular, ocular, pulmonary and nervous systems. The most serious defects include those of the heart valves and aorta. There is no cure, but the syndrome and its complications can be managed.

For more information see Marfan syndrome.

Multiple sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a disease of the central nervous system. Its symptoms are varied and unpredictable. The cause of MS is unknown and there is no cure. Treatments are available to ease symptoms and slow down the course of the disease.

For more information see Multiple sclerosis.

Motor neurone disease (MND)

Motor neurone disease (MND) is a rapidly progressing, neurological disease. Motor neurones are nerve cells that control the voluntary muscles of the trunk and limbs, and affect speech, swallowing and breathing. Damage to these nerves causes muscle weakness and wasting. People with MND become increasingly disabled, and may lose speech, have difficulty swallowing and eventually die from respiratory (breathing) failure.

For more information see Motor neurone disease (MND).

Muscular dystrophy

Muscular dystrophy is the name given to a group of inherited muscle diseases that cause progressive degeneration
and weakness of the muscles. Muscular dystrophy can occur at any age. People affected by neuromuscular disorders have different degrees of independence, mobility and carer needs. Each of the approximately 60 neuromuscular disorders has a separate cause.

For more information see **Muscular dystrophy**.

**Myasthenia gravis**

Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness. The symptoms are caused by the immune system interfering with the transmission of messages from the nerves to the muscles. There is no cure, but treatment is usually successful in managing the symptoms.

For more information see **Myasthenia gravis**.

**Parkinson's disease**

Parkinson’s disease affects one in 100 people over the age of 60. Symptoms range from tremor, rigidity and slow movements to lethargy, masked face and sleep disturbance. Although we do not know what causes Parkinson’s disease, treatments and therapies include medication, surgery and multidisciplinary therapy, including exercise.

For more information see **Parkinson’s disease**.

**Polio and post-polio syndrome**

Poliomyelitis (polio) is caused by a virus that affects the digestive system and, in some cases, the nervous system. Symptoms vary from mild, flu-like symptoms to life-threatening paralysis and possibly death. Post-polio syndrome occurs years after an initial bout of polio, with new symptoms of weakness, joint and muscle pain and fatigue. If you are not immunised, you could contract polio if your food, water or hands are contaminated with the faeces of an infected person.

For more information see **Polio and post-polio syndrome**.

**Where to get help**

- Your GP (doctor)
- **Maternal and child health service**
- Local community health centre
- Your local council
- Centre for Developmental Disability Health Victoria, call (03) 9902 4467
- Scope, call (03) 9843 3000
- Yooralla Community Learning and Living Centre, call (03) 9666 4500 or (03) 9916 5899
- Disability Intake and Response Service, call 1800 873 873
- **Disability service providers**