

## No Pain, All Gain

Your whole-body plan to end chronic aches for good

BY MATTHEW SOLAN

**F**or seven months, Elizabeth Wagner felt constantly on guard. In conversation, she only half listened; the other half of her attention focused fiercely on the intense pain that shot from her hip down to her heel and back up again. When she slept, her body shook itself awake whenever she rolled into a position that triggered the pain. She worked standing up because she could only sit for 20 minutes before the aches would become unbearable. “I could never get a free moment to relax,” says Wagner, 32, a nurse in San Diego. “After the accident, I always waited for the pain to arrive. The pain was in control of me.”

A car accident damaged the nerves in Wagner’s lower back and pelvis and left her with sciatica—a set of symptoms that included sharp, stabbing pain in the low back and fatigue and numbness in one leg. Unlike the acute pain you feel when you burn a finger, break an arm, or sprain an ankle, chronic pain like Wagner’s doesn’t subside and can linger longer than six months—sometimes for years. The pain can strike your nerves, joints, or muscles and feels like a dull, nagging ache, a steady throb, a sharp jab, or any and all of the above.

Like the 76 million other Americans who suffer from chronic pain annually, Wagner could find no simple cure for her anguish. Her doctors prescribed pain medications, of course, but the pills only provided short-term relief and left her feeling drugged and unlike herself.

Because doctors don’t fully understand chronic pain, they often choose to fight the symptom rather than examine its underlying causes. And with so few alternatives presented to them, many people assume they have to live with their suffering. But that’s not the takeaway message. “Pain is your body’s way of telling you what it needs,” says Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of *Pain Free 1-2-3* (McGraw Hill, 2006). “Think of it like your car’s dashboard. When a light flashes—whether it’s the oil, the fuel gauge, or an engine light—it’s a signal your car requires attention. Chronic pain works the same way. It’s your body’s way of saying it needs help.”



So how do you help your body? Attack the pain from different angles, and give your body everything it needs to put up the good fight. This means you need to soothe inflammation, boost energy, increase strength and movement, and support and comfort your body as needed. Here’s a four-step plan to do it right.

**Get enough sleep.** Easier said than done sometimes, but your body needs a full night of quality shut-eye to fight pain. “Sleep creates growth hormones in your body that

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stimulate tissue repair and allow you to recover from chronic pain," says Teitelbaum. "If you don't get enough sleep, between eight or nine hours, you don't give your body the chance to heal." In fact a recent study found that patients with chronic pain who were sleep deprived for two days reported more widespread pain and showed a slower repair cycle than their more rested counterparts.

If your pain prevents you from sleeping, whiffs of lavender can help you nod off. Psychologists at Wesleyan University found men and women who sniffed lavender essential oil prior to bedtime had increased slow-wave sleep, the deep slumber during which the heartbeat slows and muscles relax. For the same effect, buy a lavender-scented pillow or mix several drops of lavender essential oil in your pre-bedtime bath.

Insomnia often results from low levels of melatonin, the hormone that regulates your sleep cycle, says Teitelbaum. You should take 0.5 mg nightly until you fall into a normal sleep pattern, he says.

If muscle cramps wake you from your sleep, you could have a calcium deficiency. To boost calcium levels, Teitelbaum suggests supplements of 1,200 to 1,500 mg daily (half in the morning, half before bed).

### Employ the power of touch.

Any type of impingement in the body—like a compressed spinal disc, a muscular spasm, or even inflammation—can fuel chronic pain. In these cases, physical manipulation, such as chiropractic care and massage therapy, can provide instant and long-term relief.

A 2005 study found chiropractic more cost-effective than prescription drugs in treating chronic low back pain. Chiropractic medicine has also proven helpful in soothing other painful conditions, such as frozen shoulder, muscle spasm, and carpal tunnel syndrome.

A healing touch can also bestow powerful benefits. Massage therapy lowers pain by increasing the flow of blood and oxygen to inflamed muscles and soft tissue. Experts also believe that repetitive rubbing and stroking may

override painful signals and block them from reaching the brain. A study by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine found that two 30-minute massage therapy sessions reduced lower back pain after five weeks more effectively than at-home muscle relaxation techniques. With more than 80 types of massage styles from which to choose—all equally helpful for pain—you can easily find one that's comfortable for you.

Bear in mind that you should wait for any inflammation to subside before you start either chiropractic care or massage therapy. It took weeks for Wagner's body to heal enough after her accident so she could endure massage sessions. But she soon discovered that deep tissue massage, which works to realign layers of muscles and connective tissue, was the ideal method to hit the buried spots where her pain originated.

**Feed your body right.** Chronic pain drains your energy even as your body cries out for more energy stores to battle the pain and bring down the inflammation. A daily dose (50 mg) of a vitamin B complex will restore spent energy, while 5 grams of the sugar D-ribose twice daily will stimulate the production of ATP (adenosine triphosphate), the fuel that powers your body's tissues and muscles. People who suffer from excessive joint and muscle pain and fibromyalgia (widespread muscle pain) often have low levels of ribose, says Teitelbaum.

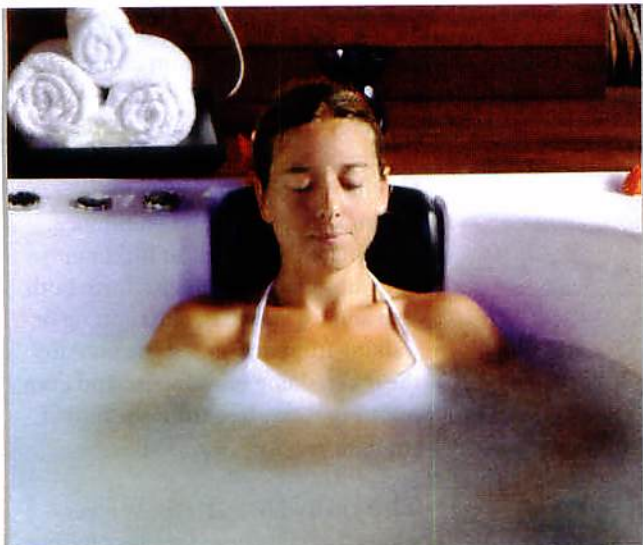
In addition to taking these supplements, eat cherries as often as possible. Research in the *New Scientist* magazine found that consuming 20 a day (about 2,000 mg of cherry fruit extract) provided more pain relief than aspirin and other painkillers.

**Commit to exercising.** That old adage "use it or lose it" definitely applies to chronic pain. "Movement gets energy flowing and helps muscles release, both of which are essential to healing and controlling chronic pain," says Mel Pohl, MD, author of *A Day Without Pain* (Central Recovery Press, 2008).

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**Aromatherapy can deliver a good night's sleep, essential for healing the root causes of pain.**





## Find the Cure for You

Target your specific pain with one of these treatments.

### The Pain: Fibromyalgia

#### The Relief: Acupuncture

A 2006 report in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* indicated that acupuncture significantly reduced chronic pain in patients with fibromyalgia. Fifty sufferers received six treatments over a three-week period. Using 18 to 20 needles at a time, researchers chose points along the meridians of the large intestine, stomach, liver spleen pericardium, and heart. Acupuncture helped fibromyalgia patients cope with ailments in the short term; its effects also proved long lasting. The acupuncture group continued to report improved symptoms compared with the control group one month and seven months later.

### The Pain: Low Back

#### The Relief: Electrotherapy

Low-powered electrical currents can jump-start tissue repair on a cellular level. In a typical 60-minute session, a therapist applies a conductive gel to the painful area and then rolls a current-emitting wand over it. Most don't even feel the mild current (one-millionth of an amp). A 2008 study in the journal *Pain* showed that twice weekly electrical stimulation treatments reduced pain and improved physical function after six weeks among 200 people with chronic low back pain. The effects even held up after six months.

### The Pain: Arthritis

#### The Relief: Hydrotherapy

"No medicine on the market can rival the beneficial physiological effects of water," says Mel Pohl, MD, author of *A Day Without Pain*. "Warm to hot water eases joint pain by reducing swelling and increases blood flow to fight inflammation." One study found that patients with chronic rheumatoid arthritis who had 30-minute warm-water immersions twice a week showed a significant improvement in joint tenderness after four weeks.



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from Clearwater, Florida, had fibromyalgia, which kept her from doing simple leg lifts on land. Luckily deep-water aerobics—taught at most YMCAs, health clubs, and local hospitals—gave her the support she needed to increase her muscle strength and endurance. Wearing an aqua belt to hold her body upright, she could perform both arm and leg exercises, like running or walking from one end of the pool to the other, skiing movements, and even jumping jacks, free from the added strain of gravity.

**The pain-free truth.** Wagner adopted a multilayered strategy for her pain management, including nutrition; massage therapy and chiropractic care; electrical stimulation; exercise; acupuncture; and other lifestyle changes. She didn't need them all at once—nor did she rely on them all the time—but the more options she had, the better she felt. Anyone in chronic pain should embark on a similar path, because it works. Nearly a year after her injury, Wagner defeated her chronic pain. "I don't have to pay attention to it anymore," she says. "If I do something stupid like lifting a box of books wrong, and my back hurts, I don't worry about it. I know through my experience that I can heal my body, and the pain will go away." ■

Recovery Press, 2008). Too sore to get started? Think simple and easy. Begin with a daily 10-minute walk, take up a gentle yoga class, or try the slow-motion exercise of t'ai chi or qigong. A 2008 study at the Tufts New England Medical Center discovered patients suffering from knee osteoarthritis reported greater pain reduction after doing t'ai chi twice a week for 12 weeks. And a single 10-minute qigong session reduced chronic pain in older folks, according to a 2003 study in *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*.

If even that's too tough, follow Cheryl Schwartz' lead and hit the pool. Schwartz,

MATTHEW SOLAN is a freelance health writer based in St. Petersburg, Florida.

## Pain by the Numbers

**76.5 million** Americans report persistent pain each year

**42** The percentage of chronic-pain patients who suffer longer than one year

**\$100 billion** Annual cost of the condition for healthcare, lost income, and lost productivity

**18** The percentage of women who have experienced a migraine headache

**80** The percentage of African-American and Hispanic patients who waited until pain severity was 10 on a 10-point scale before calling a doctor

**9x** How much more likely women are to develop fibromyalgia than men