

Acute Pain

by Tim Humphries

The term 'acute' refers to pain and symptoms that have only been present for a matter of days. As opposed to 'chronic' symptoms that have been felt for weeks, months or longer. Neither of these terms indicate the degree of pain being felt as both can be mildly or severely painful.

Acute pain is often associated with some degree of trauma to a structure or series of structures, such as muscles, joints or ligaments. A sudden twist or jarring injury may be the trigger but not always. At times pain may start for no particular reason although is often related to a particular lifestyle or activity, such as repetitive strain.

Acute pain is, however, very much a chemical and cellular response to tissue damage or strain. It is often characterised by quite severe, constant pain, inflammation and maybe some swelling and usually disturbs normal activities. It is not a pain that you can 'work through' as you find you have to regularly adopt different positions to make the pain a little more tolerable. This is particularly the case when it is associated with muscle spasm, which is common with back pain and can be severely limiting.

Although acute pain can be severe it generally doesn't last too long before the pain becomes more on/off and less intense. It should be borne in mind, however, that, despite the severity of the pain, the chemical response to tissue damage that creates acute pain is vital for tissue repair and healing. It is a process that the body has to go through to get itself better. It is helpful, initially, to take painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication, such as Ibuprofen, to limit the degree of pain and inflammation but once the acute phase is over the emphasis should be on promoting inflammation to enhance tissue repair. Resting the injured area during this period is beneficial to prevent any tissue aggravation although complete rest is usually unnecessary. Maintaining some degree of movement is important to prevent a stiffening of the affected area.

It is very important to get the right treatment and advice for acute pain, if it does not settle on its own accord, as it can become chronic which is more likely to be felt long-term.