

Chronic Neuropathic Pain: Does Anything Help?

One of the most common questions Conquer Chiari receives from patients is, “What can be done to help with the pain?” Research has clearly shown that Chiari patients suffer from pain levels on par with more well-recognized chronic pain conditions, which in turn can lead to high levels of disability, depression, and social isolation. While Chiari patients often must endure a combination of musculoskeletal and neuropathic pain, a recent review from Sweden looked at what interventions are effective with neuropathic pain in particular.

Neuropathic pain is due to actual damage to the nervous system which then causes people to feel pain in response to normally non-painful stimulus such as a light touch, or even pain in the absence of any stimulus at all. In general, medications aren’t very effective in helping with neuropathic pain and often the side effects are too much for patients to handle. Other types of treatments include psychological based therapies to help people adapt to the pain but reduce its impact, physical interventions, exercise programs, and multi-disciplinary approaches.

The Swedish team reviewed all English language and Swedish studies that involved participants with neuropathic pain (note this was not a Chiari specific study) for more than three months. They focused only on a type of study known as a randomized controlled trial (RCT), which is considered the gold standard of research. In an RCT, participants are randomly assigned to receive the intervention/treatment being studied or to be in a control group which does not receive the intervention. This way, any difference between the two groups is likely due to the intervention. In addition, the studies had to be focused on non-medication interventions and assess as the outcome at least one of pain intensity, pain related disability, or work participation.

They found 15 RCTs which met their criteria and involved a total of 764 chronic neuropathic pain patients. The most common interventions were mindfulness training (5), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (4), and yoga (2). On average, the interventions lasted 9 weeks and the outcome data only extended to six months after the interventions. When they combined the results from the different studies, the researchers found that overall *any* intervention was superior to the control groups in reducing pain intensity and disability and improving work participation and quality of life. However, they also found that the ACT and mindfulness programs were better at reducing disability, while the non-psychological interventions were better at reducing pain intensity.

Conquer Chiari has committed substantial resources to investigating and developing interventions to help Chiari patients deal with chronic pain. First, we have conducted multiple trials of a web-based ACT program to help people re-engage with daily activities despite being in pain. We are currently in the process of modifying this program to incorporate additional, Chiari specific material, and plan on offering it through the Chiari Academy within the next year or two. In addition, we are actively working on developing a Chiari specific, home exercise program to help patients strengthen their neck and shoulders and improve their balance, which should also reduce pain and disability. Finally, we are in the early stages of planning research into whether dietary changes can improve pain and function. Our ultimate goal is to offer multiple programs, based on scientifically established effectiveness, which can be individualized to each Chiari patient’s specific needs.

Sources: Rehabilitation interventions for neuropathic pain: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. Bäckryd E, Ghafouri N, Gerdle B, Dragioti E. J Rehabil Med. 2024 Aug 5;56:jrm40188. doi: 10.2340/jrm.v56.40188. PMID: 39101676

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Conquer Chiari is a 501(c)(3) public charity dedicated to improving the experiences and outcomes of Chiari patients through education, awareness and research.