

The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) Classification of Chronic Pain Syndromes

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Introduction

Chronic pain is defined as persistent pain that lasts longer than 3 months and is sub-classified into categories based on the affected anatomical system, including: chronic primary pain, chronic cancer pain, chronic posttraumatic and postsurgical pain, chronic neuropathic pain, chronic headache and orofacial pain, chronic visceral pain and chronic musculoskeletal pain. In collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) developed this system to better classify the diversity of chronic pain syndromes. Additionally, Analgesic, Anesthetic, and Addiction Clinical Trial Translations Innovations Opportunities and Networks (ACTTION)-American Pain Society Pain Taxonomy (AAPT) has similarly categorized pain disorders based on anatomical structures/organ systems, with the following categories: peripheral and central nervous systems, musculoskeletal, orofacial and head, visceral/pelvic/urogenital, and disease-associated pains not classified elsewhere [1].

Classifications

Chronic primary pain is defined by persistent pain for greater than 3 months that has a significant impact on emotional well-being and an individual's functional capacity. It must also not be better explained by another condition. In order to fit this classification, persistent pain must not fit other classifications of musculoskeletal, visceral or neuropathic, i.e. non-specific low back pain.

Examples: fibromyalgia, non-specific low back pain, and chronic pelvic pain.

Chronic cancer pain includes both the pain from treatment/therapy as well as the cancer itself. It is sub-classified into musculoskeletal, visceral or neuropathic and further by its association to movement and treatment/procedures. However, some types of treatment and procedures cross over into post-surgical or post-traumatic pain classifications.

Examples: pain from metastases, chemotherapy induced pain, cancer surgery pain, and radiotherapy induced pain.

Chronic posttraumatic and postsurgical pain is defined as pain that began after a procedure or a tissue injury, including burns at least 3 months after an event. This does not include pre-existing pain or pain from infections and must not be confused with common post-surgical neuropathic pain [2].

Examples: any surgery or trauma related injury, crossover with cancer surgery pain.

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Chronic neuropathic pain is defined as allodynia or hyperalgesia of the skin, viscera and musculoskeletal system. In order to be classified as neuropathic, there must be a documented history of injury to the nervous system, such as in a stroke, and there must be territorial involvement, such as a specific dermatome. Neuropathic pain is further sub-divided into peripheral and central [1, 2].

Examples: peripheral neuropathy.

Chronic headache and orofacial pain have a minor deviation to the standard definition of chronic pain, where pain must occur in 50% of days for at least 3 months. Subtypes of headaches are already widely described, and simply meet this classification by symptom chronicity [1].

Chronic visceral pain comes from the internal organs located anywhere in the body but is perceived by somatic tissues of the same dermatomal distribution. Cancer of the organs will also be classified in the chronic cancer pain section, while the rest is sub-divided by ischemia/thrombosis, compression and referred location [1].

Examples: inflammatory pain, vascular ischemia/infarcts, and compression pain.

Chronic musculoskeletal pain is comprised of all disorders and causes affecting the bones, joints, muscles and soft tissues. Neuropathic and somatic referred pain does not meet this criterion, as it must be nociceptive pain and they already have their own specific classification [1, 2].

Examples: inflammatory pain, and osteoarticular pain.

High Yield Points

- Chronic pain syndromes are divided into 7 major classifications, with subcategories allowing for a more detailed description of the symptoms.
- In order to be considered chronic, the IASP has defined chronic pain as lasting longer than 3 months.
- Depending on the complexity of the syndrome, and the systems affected, pain may fit into several different categories at the same time.

Questions

1. A surgeon removes a large, advanced stage colon cancer from a 70-year-old male who has had recent weight loss, a drop in hematocrit and a change in stool caliber size over the past few months. After a successful surgery and re-anastomosis of the colon, the patient continues to complain of pain at his 4-month follow up visit. What type of pain is this classified as according to the WHO/IASP?

- A. Chronic post-surgical pain
- B. Chronic cancer pain
- C. Chronic visceral pain
- D. A crossover between all above types of chronic pain.

Answer: D

2. An obese 23-year-old female who has been taking oral contraceptive medications for the past 5 years has been having intermittent headaches, vision changes and rhinorrhea or over the past year. In order to accurately diagnose her as having “chronic headache pain”, which of the following must be present?

- A. Pain occurring in 50% of the days
- B. Pain occurring in at least 3 months
- C. Pain impacting the emotional well-being and functional capacity
- D. Documented injury to the nervous system
- E. Both A and B

Answer: E

3. A middle-aged female has been complaining of non-specific neck and shoulder pain for several years, with no clear diagnosis and has failed many medications including muscle relaxants, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and narcotics. X-rays and MRI of the neck, shoulder, and C-spine have all been negative for any acute pathology. On physical exam you elicit tenderness in 9 areas in addition to the neck and shoulder. What category would be most appropriate to classify her pain?

- A. Chronic primary pain
- B. Chronic musculoskeletal pain
- C. Chronic neuropathic pain
- D. Chronic visceral pain

Answer: A

References

1. Fillingim RB, et al. The ACTION-American Pain Society Pain Taxonomy (AAPT): an evidence-based and multidimensional approach to classifying chronic pain conditions. *J Pain*. 2014;15:241–9.
2. Treede R-D, et al. A classification of chronic pain for *ICD-11*. *Pain*. 2015;156(6):1003–7. PMC Web 21 Dec. 2017.