

Pain Self-Care Checklist

Chronic pain is often a mix of ‘issues with the tissues’ and a ‘volume control’ (a sensitive nervous system), and you often need to address both to successfully manage pain. If everything you try (e.g., exercise or manual therapy) seems to make you worse, start by minimizing stress to your body and managing the sensitive nervous system. You can use the “Self-Care Toolbox”¹ handout to keep track of what self-care strategies work best for you. Handouts with additional info are identified in footnotes.

1. Minimize strain on your body in daily activities

- a. Posture and body mechanics:
 - ☐ Sitting in good alignment.²
 - ☐ Standing in good alignment.
 - ☐ Lying down in good alignment.
 - ☐ Use good body mechanics and joint protection principles.³
- b. Breathing:⁴
 - ☐ Nose breathing: don’t breathe through your mouth except when exercising vigorously
 - ☐ Diaphragmatic: belly or ‘umbrella’ breathing. Upper chest should not move except for vigorous exercise.
 - ☐ Slow breathing: exhale for twice as long as you inhale. Aim for 6-10 breaths/minute at rest.
- c. Walk softly in good alignment:
 - ☐ Wear supportive shoes with orthotics, if needed, when standing and walking.
 - ☐ Keep your body stacked and centered, don’t let knees hyperextend, ‘tread lightly’ like walking on ice.
- d. Supports and braces:
 - ☐ Wear supports and braces, as needed, to protect joints.⁵
 - ☐ Wear compression clothing or supports to improve proprioception (body awareness)

2. Identify and minimize things that fill your ‘sensitivity bucket’

- a. Sleep:⁶
 - ☐ Implement sleep hygiene.
 - ☐ CBT-I (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for insomnia). Calm nervous system before bed. CBT-i & apps
 - ☐ Avoid blue light, food, stimulants before bed.
 - ☐ Get sunlight exposure (or infrared).
 - ☐ Get regular exercise or movement, including exercise ‘snacks.’
 - ☐ Check medications and avoid or take earlier meds that can interfere with sleep.
- b. Minimize inflammation
 - ☐ Recognize and minimize Mast Cell Activation Disorder (MCAD) triggers.⁷
 - ☐ Manage chronic inflammation using lifestyle approaches (sleep, diet, exercise, stress management)
 - ☐ Activate vagus nerve: slow breathing, humming/chanting, ear massage, electrical stimulation, etc.⁸
- c. Manage dysautonomia/POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome):
 - ☐ Identify and minimize POTS triggers.”⁹

¹ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Self-Care Toolbox” and HSD 103

² <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Seated 5-Block” and HSD 105

³ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Joint Protection” and ergonomic handouts, HSD 105

⁴ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Breathing” and HSD 109

⁵ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Braces and Splints” and HSD 105

⁶ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Sleep Hygiene and Positioning” and “Sleep Checklist,” HSD 107

⁷ https://tmsforacure.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/TMS_Full-Patient-Guide_r6.pdf And HSD 102

⁸ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Relaxation and Vagus Nerve Activation” and HSD 112

⁹ <https://webspace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: “Overview for POTS” and HSD 102

- ☐ POTS Self-Care Checklist.¹⁰
- ☐ Gradual increase in exercise using heartrate or Rate of Perceived Exertion to regulate intensity.
- d. Calm the nervous system:
 - ☐ When you cannot avoid a negative situation, try not to automatically react with a stress response.
 - ☐ Slow, diaphragmatic/umbrella breathing. Exhale twice as long as you inhale. 6-10 breaths/min at rest.²
 - ☐ Avoid 'unhelpful thinking' to minimize pain sensitivity. This is not 'toxic positivity' but constructive thinking.¹¹
 - ☐ Add gratitude, awe, positive emotions or spirituality.
 - ☐ Biofeedback, such as heart rate variability (HRV) to activate the parasympathetic nervous system.¹²
 - ☐ Consider pain management apps, such as Curable, WebMAP (for teenagers), PainCoach, CBT-i.¹³
 - ☐ With severe central sensitization, medication may be helpful to calm nerves (see below).
- e. Exercise and movement:
 - ☐ Find safe ways to move the body frequently during the day. This may include movement 'snacks'.¹⁴
 - ☐ Add mind-body movement, such as Pilates, tai-chi, yoga or qigong (avoiding positions stressful to the body).
 - ☐ Add playful movement, such as dance, exergames, augmented reality, exercising to music.¹⁵
- 3. **Use physical pain management modalities**
 - ☐ Heat for aching pain. Ice for severe or acute pain (usually >6/10) or inflammation.
 - ☐ Topicals: menthol, capsaicin (hot rubs), CBD, medicated (e.g. NSAIDs).¹⁶
 - ☐ TENS (aka electromassage) using either conventional ('buzzy') or acupuncture-like ('prickly') settings.
 - ☐ Manage myofascial trigger points (TrP) with TrP pressure, release, rolling.
- 4. **Dietary changes**
 - ☐ Limit processed foods and high sugar/carbohydrate foods.
 - ☐ Eat an anti-inflammatory diet.
 - ☐ Identify and manage food sensitivities, such as lactose, gluten, or histamine intolerance.
- 5. **Medications and supplements**
 - ☐ Consider supplements for MCAD: vit C, vit D, Omega-3, diamine oxidase (DAO), quercetin
 - ☐ Consider meds for MCAD if that seems likely.¹⁷
 - ☐ Discuss low dose naltrexone (LDN) with your provider.
 - ☐ Non-NSAID analgesics (e.g., acetaminophen).
 - ☐ Minimize NSAIDs unless you have acute inflammation.
 - ☐ Avoid opiates, as they can increase pain sensitivity over time.
- 6. **Improve sensorimotor function to improve body alignment and joint stability¹⁸**
 - ☐ Improve proprioception and body awareness.
 - ☐ Improve motor control in deep stabilizer muscles

¹⁰ <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Checklist for POTS" and HSD 102

¹¹ <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Unhelpful Thinking"

¹² <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Heart-rate variability biofeedback"

¹³ <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Pain Management Apps" and "Pain Sensitization" and HSD 103

¹⁴ <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Starting to Exercise" and HSD 104/104 part 2

¹⁵ <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Exergames" and "Augmented Reality"

¹⁶ <https://webpace.clarkson.edu/~lrussek/research.html>: "Topicals"

¹⁷ The Mast Cell Disease Society has a good medication handout: https://tmsforacure.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/TMS_Medications-Infographic-for-Supportive-Care.pdf.

¹⁸ The Zebra Club is a great resource if you want professional guidance. <https://thezebra.club>