

# Muscle matters: Use mindfulness to address your pain

**Musculoskeletal pain affects more than just your muscles and bones. It can also affect your mental health, sleep patterns, relationships, activities of daily living and on-the-job effectiveness. That's especially problematic with chronic pain, which can linger for months and even years.<sup>61</sup>**

Fortunately, you may be able to get relief without undergoing risky surgery or taking habit-forming drugs. Mindfulness is a proven approach that often outperforms medical interventions and comes with no negative side effects.<sup>62</sup>



## What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the state of being fully present and aware of what's going on in your mind, body and surroundings. It's an ability we all have, but there are techniques that can help you become more mindful, including yoga, mindfulness meditation and clinician-led mindfulness-based stress reduction.<sup>63,64</sup>

When you're in pain, it might seem counterintuitive to focus on what's happening in your body instead of doing something to take your mind off your pain. But growing evidence proves that mindfulness can help. In one study, for example, mindfulness meditation deactivated the brain region that is the gateway for pain signals, effectively causing those signals to fade away.<sup>65,66</sup>

## Pinpointing the source

If you're feeling unexplained pain, be sure to seek medical attention so you can identify and address the cause. Mindfulness doesn't treat the root causes of pain—nor do drugs like opioids, which simply mask the symptoms.

61 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4935027/>

62 <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/future-health/treating-chronic-pain-without-feeding-addiction.html>

63 <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>

64 <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition>

65 <https://www.painnewsnetwork.org/stories/2015/11/13/mindfulness-meditation-changes-brain-activity-to-reduce-pain>

66 <https://www.jneurosci.org/content/35/46/15307>

67 <https://mrsmindfulness.com/mindfulness-meditation-for-pain-relief-in-simple-5-steps/>

68 <https://www.msk.org.au/mindfulness-meditation>

## The basics of mindfulness meditation<sup>67,68</sup>

There's no one right way to practice mindfulness meditation. The body scan is one common approach.

### Get ready

Move to a quiet place where you can sit or lie down comfortably. Remove distractions, such as your phone or your pet. Close your eyes, and begin to breathe slowly and gently.

### Ground yourself

Feel the weight of your body. Sense the parts of your body that are touching your chair or mat. Think about where you're feeling tension and try to release that tension so you can relax.

### Focus on the present

Try to let go of the past and future and just think about the present. Release regrets, worries, plans and anything else that threatens to distract you.

### Scan your body

In your mind, scan each part of your body, perhaps starting with your feet and moving to your head. How does each part feel? Is it hot or cold, tired or heavy? Don't think about how your body feels; just be aware.

### Become aware of your whole body

Finally, become aware of your body as a unified whole. Again, don't think about it or analyse it; just feel it.

## Building mindfulness into your day<sup>69,70,71</sup>

Try to incorporate mindfulness into your daily routine. Here are some suggestions.

- Keep a gratitude journal.
- Take a walk.
- Place sticky notes around your workspace that read "Pause," "Breathe" and "Be Present."
- Turn off the radio while you're driving or riding to work.
- Download a mindfulness app that will remind you to breathe.
- Take stretch breaks between tasks.
- Listen to relaxing music.
- Let the sounds you hear—a car horn, a bird, a ringing phone—trigger a moment of mindfulness.
- Laugh. (There's even a practice called Laughter Yoga.)

You don't have to be a bodybuilder for your muscles to matter. Healthy muscles help prevent or minimise a wide range of physical and mental health conditions. At our Musculoskeletal health resources hub, you can find the flyers and articles offering easy-to-action lifestyle changes to help you build muscle strength and prevent and manage musculoskeletal problems, including low back pain.

Also, Aetna International members can access the Health Hub—register if you haven't already—to quickly find

self-help tools, professional services, member offers, and to submit and track claims and more. Within the Health Hub, you can learn more about the Kaia app, which provides curated, customised guidance from pain-treatment experts, and ClassPass, which offers virtual fitness classes.

For more information about your health care benefits, contact your plan sponsor or one of Aetna International's expert sales consultants for group business or individuals and families.

## Straighten up. Stretch out. Stay strong.

### Musculoskeletal support resources:

<https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/musculoskeletal-health-support-resource.html>

**Health Hub:** <https://www.aetnainternational.com/members/login.do>

69 <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/health-care/lifestyle-better-health/mindfulness-tips-for-expats.html>

70 <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/health-care/lifestyle-better-health/health-stress-wellness-mindfulness-techniques.html>

71 <https://zenfulspirit.com/2015/09/10/practice-daily-mindfulness/>

72 <https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/laughter-cure>