

YOU, EVEN BETTER



## state of pain

WHEN IT COMES TO CHRONIC PAIN, LOS ANGELES IS A HOTBED OF ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS AND THERAPIES THAT DISCOURAGE DEPENDENCY. BY GENEVIEVE JAMES

Here's a hard pill to swallow: According to the US Government Office of National Drug Control Policy, the abuse of prescription painkillers has reached public-health-crisis status. And while pill popping is running rampant in many major cities across the country, LA is topping the list. Why is pain management such a huge SoCal concern? Experts say many of the nine million residents are actually *in pain*.

"Every day, I see patients discouraged and debilitated by chronic pain that say, 'I'm miserable. Fix me, Doc!'" says Alexander Hersel, MD, an anesthesiologist and founder of the Pain Management and Injury Relief Medical Center in Santa Monica. It's this common plea for a short-term solution—whether for physical trauma or emotional stress that manifests into legitimate pain—that has caused addiction to pain medications such as Valium, OxyContin and Percocet to skyrocket into an epidemic.

Experts agree pills aren't necessarily the answer when treating some types of pain, mainly because of the well-documented risk for opioid dependency. "Once you take painkillers, the body shuts down its natural production of neurochemicals, including serotonin, dopamine and endorphins—all of which block the brain's receptors for pain," says Daoshing Ni, LAc, DOM, PhD, an acupuncturist and cofounder of Tao of Wellness in Santa Monica. "And when the meds wear off, you have major withdrawal of that neurochemical calm and therefore a drive to take more pills to compensate."

The quest for a natural alternative to treat pain is sending Angelinos beyond the medicine cabinet—and for good reason. "Pain is a complex disease, which is experienced both physically and emotionally, and for optimal results a person must actively engage in a mix of healing techniques," says Dr. Hersel.

Acupuncture, a 5,000-year-old Chinese technique that has been validated by the scientific community, uses strategically placed needles to "increase the natural stimulation of 'happy' chemicals that lower the pain signals and boost the body's cortisol levels, lessening inflammation," says Dr. Ni.

Chiropractic massage is predominantly used for treating pain caused by posture and spinal misalignment, as well as muscle spasms in the shoulders, neck and back. "It can include gentle manipulation of the muscles, making it ideal for those sensitive to touch," explains Steven Tan, MD, MTOM, LAc, director of complementary and alternative medicine at the California Health & Longevity Institute in Westlake Village.

Mind and body therapies such as hypnotherapy and meditation connect to subconscious thoughts and reprogram anxious responses into adaptive and helpful cues. Says Dr. Tan, "You can train the brain to switch attention away from pain toward more positive feelings." **LAC**

### GOT PAIN?

Dr. Hersel, of the Pain Management and Injury Relief Medical Center in Santa Monica, defines the types of discomfort that can compromise your quality of life.

#### CHRONIC

Severe and persistent pain requires a sustainable plan, explains Dr. Hersel. Diagnosis begins with a physician's examination and review of medical history followed by tests such as MRIs, X-rays and CT scans. A treatment regimen often includes a combination of medications, surgical intervention and physical therapy.

#### MODERATE

Mild pain typically calls for painkillers prescribed synergistically with healing therapies such as acupuncture, meditation or spinal-cord stimulation, which is essentially a pacemaker for the spine that redirects pain signals from the brain, says the doctor.

#### ACUTE

Dr. Hersel explains that acute pain can be treated with anti-inflammatory medications, muscle relaxers and physical therapy in conjunction with alternative therapies including acupuncture, chiropractic massage, Pilates and yoga.