



Is The Pain All in My Head?

Understanding the brain's real role in chronic pain

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Patients hear this question constantly, usually meant as a dismissal. The honest answer: pain is always processed in the brain, and that does not make it any less real.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Pain is always processed by the brain, but that does not make it imaginary.
- Central sensitization can amplify pain long after the original tissue has healed.
- Calming the nervous system, through movement, sleep, stress management, and treatment, can reduce pain even without a structural "fix."

THE FULL PICTURE

Every sensation you feel, from a stubbed toe to a herniated disc, becomes "pain" only after your nervous system interprets it. Chronic pain is simply a case where that interpretation system has become oversensitive.

This is called central sensitization. After months or years of pain signals traveling the same neural pathways, the spinal cord and brain get better and better at amplifying them, sometimes long after the original tissue has healed. Think of it like a car alarm that used to need a real break-in to trigger it, but now goes off when a leaf blows past. The alarm still works. It is just calibrated wrong.

This is why imaging can look mild while pain feels severe, and why two people with identical MRIs can have completely different experiences. It also explains why treatments that calm the nervous system can meaningfully reduce pain even when they do not fix a structural problem.

None of this means the pain is imagined, exaggerated, or a personal failing. It means chronic pain is a whole-nervous-system condition, not just a local tissue problem. If you have been told your pain is all in your head, what you were probably not told is that the head is not lying.

This handout is for general patient education and does not replace individualized medical advice. Discuss your specific diagnosis and treatment options with your physician.

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