

# Does It Work?

## Drug-Free Pain Relief

BY SHARLENE BREakey

If you live with chronic pain, you may be rightly concerned about overusing opioids. “There’s a range of treatments for pain, including non-opioid medications,” says Paul Christo, M.D., a pain specialist at Johns Hopkins. “There are also many alternative therapies that can ease pain to a meaningful extent, reducing the need for meds.” Experts weigh in on how—and how well—they work:

### MUSIC THERAPY

**WHAT IT IS:** “We engage patients in playing, listening, or moving to music to calm the body and mind, redirect attention from pain, and increase comfort,” says Hannah Shefsky, a board-certified music therapist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

**WHAT WE KNOW:** A 2016 analysis found that music therapy significantly reduced acute, procedural, and chronic pain in kids and adults. “The right

music can activate the brain’s reward system, releasing endorphins and suppressing pain,” says Dr. Christo.

**SHOULD YOU TRY IT?** Yes! Find a therapist at [musictherapy.org](https://musictherapy.org), or use home strategies such as building your own playlist from songs you associate with happy times. Begin with ones that match your current energy level, then gradually shift to calmer, slower tunes.

### VIRTUAL REALITY

**WHAT IT IS:** A VR-goggled trip into an awe-inspiring experience, such as exploring the ocean or flying over fjords, to help reduce pain.

**WHAT WE KNOW:** A 2017 study showed that participants with ailments ranging from GI disease to cancer showed as much as a three-point drop on a 10-point pain scale while using VR goggles. “The brain can’t capture all the information coming at us at once. An immersive experience like



swimming with dolphins shifts its focus off pain signals so they never reach the brain,” says study author Brennan Spiegel, M.D., director of health service research at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

**SHOULD YOU TRY IT?** Sure, but it can be pricey, as you need a top-quality VR device—units with slower processing speed can make users nauseated. Be sure to use software specifically designed for pain relief.

**BRANDS TO TRY:** Quest 2 headset (\$299) and Pain Relief software, by Oculus (\$2); XR telehealth subscription (covered by some insurance plans)

## LIGHT THERAPY

**WHAT IT IS:** Wearing light-emitting goggles or sitting by a light-therapy box for 30 to 60 minutes each morning to reduce

severity of pain and sensitivity to it.

**WHAT WE KNOW:** In two recent studies, bright light in the morning reduced pain sensitivity in women with fibromyalgia and veterans with chronic back pain. “Light therapy tackles pain from different directions—as an anti-depressant and a sleep aid, and possibly through the circadian system,” says Helen Burgess, Ph.D., codirector of the Sleep and Circadian Research Laboratory at the University of Michigan.

**SHOULD YOU TRY IT?** Yes, as long as you don’t have bipolar disorder, glaucoma, or macular degeneration (light may make these worse). At the very least, it can boost your mood and help you sleep.

**BRANDS TO TRY:** Re-Timer Light Therapy Glasses (\$189); Carex Day-Light Classic Plus Light Therapy Lamp (\$150); Boxelite by Northern Technologies (\$180)