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Making Virtual Reality a Reality for People with Pain

 Nicole Staggs Rizi
2 months ago in All Types of Pain, Back Pain, Chronic Pain, Emotional Pain, Hip Pain, Stomach Pain
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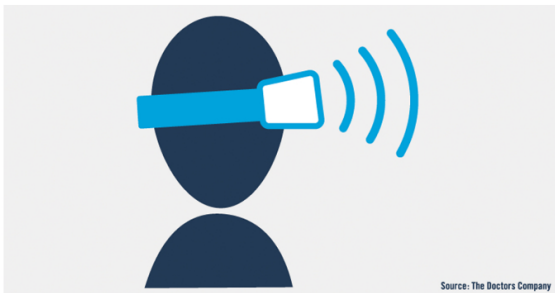
If you think virtual reality is only being used for gaming, think again. It's actually one of the most promising advances in recent years for pain management. As the technology behind virtual reality and augmented reality advances, so do the ways it can be used and the opportunities for real people to try it.

Research for the application of virtual reality for pain began in the 1990s, but only recently has the equipment become more readily available.

"This wave of new and improved devices — along with a growing opioid epidemic that has left physicians scrambling for better options for patients experiencing pain — has sparked a renewed interest in VR distraction therapy," said *The Washington Post* in a 2018 piece that explains how virtual reality is being used by hospitals to help people cope with pain.



Virtual reality for pain management involves the Gate Control Theory of Pain which "suggests that a person may interpret pain stimuli differently depending upon mental/emotional factors such as attention paid to the pain, emotions associated with the pain, and past experience of the pain. VR addresses both attention paid to pain and the patient's emotional state: *The immersive distraction of VR can help a patient mentally transport to another space, such as an underwater seascape, which may also positively affect the patient's emotional state.*"



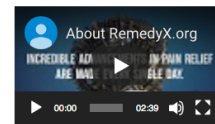
Source: The Doctors Company

The research for the use of VR for pain is on-going — but promising.

U.S. World & News Report explained that, "research published in 2017 in the Journal of Medical Internet Research concluded that the use of VR in hospitalized patients "significantly reduces pain" compared to a two-dimensional video. A separate study, published in 2016 in the journal *PLOS One*, found that a five-minute virtual reality experience decreased the sensation of chronic pain by an average of 33 percent from pre-session to post-session. The study involved 30 participants who suffered from an array of chronic pain disorders, including cervical spine pain, lumbar spine pain, hip pain and abdominal pain."











"Lasting pain relief may be possible by combining VR technology with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a well-studied and recommended psychosocial intervention for pain," wrote Lynn Webster, M.D. Vice President, Scientific Affairs for *Wavelength*. He cites a "new concept introduced by a Silicon Valley company, *CongnifiSense*, which is attempting to integrate VR with CBT. The company calls this proprietary approach Virtual Reality Neuropsychological Therapy (VRNT). VRNT is aimed not at distraction but at helping the brain unlearn chronic pain."

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- Hand & Wrist Pain
- Headache & Migraine
- Inflammation
- Jaw & Tooth Pain
- Joint Pain
- Hip Pain
- Menstrual Pain
- Muscle Pain
- Neck Pain
- Nerve Pain



The New York Times agrees.

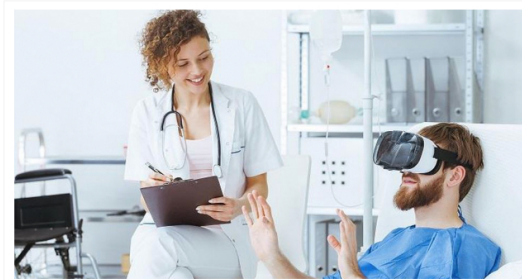
Virtual reality is "more than a distraction, researchers say. It's more like a brain hack that occupies the brain so fully that it has no room to process pain sensations at the same time."



Credit: Gracia Lam for the New York Times

Forbes went as far as to say that VR may even help combat the opioid crisis.

"While cannabis is being looked in to as an alternative [to opioids], the potential of VR, without any potential addiction-risks cannot be overlooked. VR has already proved successful in addressing any pain associated with acute procedures, working by distracting the patients. But chronic pain usage is also coming up, and can significantly improve the lives of those living with chronic pain."



Credit: Forbes

VR has the potential to start a rehab revolution, according to the Medical Device Network.

"Chronic pain presents a tricky conundrum for health providers, as the source of a patient's pain is often hard to track down physiologically, and the ongoing opioid crisis in the US and elsewhere has put into stark relief the risks of long-term treatment of pain through opiates and other strong painkillers." They featured VRHealth, which "presents its technology as a potential alternative to pharmacological pain management through nothing more than immersive distraction."



"We will see VR being adopted as a replacement for opiates and different kinds of pain relief medication, because it's very powerful with no side effects," says Orr.
Credit: VRHealth

Credit: Medical Device Network

NationsWell predicts that "doctors could start prescribing video games instead of pills.

Even the VA is using VR "at over 60 sites, including VA hospitals, military bases and university centers to reduce PTSD symptoms. In particular, BRAVEMIND VR Exposure Therapy software, which was created at the University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies, is "provided free of charge for its clinical use and research upon documenting clinician expertise in the delivery of Prolonged Exposure Therapy for the treatment of combat-related PTSD."

One of the first companies to make VR more affordable and accessible was Facebook-owned Oculus VR.

In 2012, they did a [Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign](#) for the Oculus Rift, a VR headset originally designed for ultra-immersive video games. At the time of this writing, it has 9,522 backers who have pledged \$2,437,429 to help bring this project to life.



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In 2019, **VRHealth** launched the first telehealth-VR medical platform specifically designed for consumers to use at home.

VRHealth has also partnered with AARP. "VRHealth has a residency in AARP Innovation Lab and is integrating core features of its product into the "Health and Wellness" section of **Alcove VR**, a virtual reality experience that enables families to connect no matter their budget, time or mobility constraints.



So, how can you try it? As with any treatment, the place to start is with your doctor — and to become familiar with your options.

One method is a head-mounted display (HMD), which involves wearing a heavy-duty pair of goggles so that your visual field is surrounded by an immersive experience. These are also called "Virtual Reality headsets" or "VR glasses".



Tom's Guide put together a [list of VR headsets you can buy now, or soon](#). There are also [treadmills](#) that let you physically move around in a virtual environment.

Have YOU tried virtual reality to manage pain? Tell us about it in the comments and [share resources here](#).

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