

Chronic Pain Cookbook by Helen Jones*



*With some help from Augusto (pictured above)

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www.... the who, why and what

Who am I? I'm a 28 year old who has chronic pain affecting my whole body, especially my hands. I love reading, craft, cooking and baking and all of this is made extremely difficult by the chronic pain.

Why am I doing this? As I've said, I love cooking and I have complicated dietary requirements which make ready meals etc quite difficult. I reached a point with my pain where the only food I could handle was tins of soup (opened with an electric tin opener) and frozen food which you just chuck in the oven. This wasn't my usual diet. I struggled a lot to get my head round this new way of thinking. Things like microwavable rice were part of my new world and hadn't featured at all in my old world. The transition was made harder by all the emotional baggage that a worsening chronic illness comes with.

What is the chronic pain cookbook? This is a list of recipes which have helped me do a little bit of cooking. A lot of them involved cheats and I can't do all of them all of the time but at least my life isn't all ready meals. NB. There is nothing wrong with ready meals, they just don't work for my dietary requirements and I enjoy cooking.

As a disclaimer, these aren't foods to make you magically better. When I was trying to find recipes online, instead of finding things that wouldn't leave me in agony after, I came across page after page of recipes and diets which promised to cure the chronic pain. This will not do that. But hopefully it'll help someone else to maintain a little bit of independence and a little bit of themselves. Cooking and baking was a huge part of who I am and losing that is frightening. I am also not a professional, this is just based on my experience.

I've tried to flag up any difficulties I have with the recipes, not out of self pity, but so that hopefully you'll be able to evaluate any difficulties you might have. I want this to be a work in progress so any feedback or recipe suggestions, please let me know.

A note about the recipes and ingredients

These are recipes I've put together from my experience so they reflect my specific dietary needs. I am pescetarian (I eat fish but not meat), severely lactose intolerant (I can cope with some lactose free cheese but nothing else), don't eat tomatoes (at all, in any form) and can only tolerate a little bit of soya in my diet.

Cheese throughout the recipes will refer to hard mature LactoFree cheese and milk will refer to Oatly Oat Milk (these are the brands I use but there are others out there) but regular cheese and any form of milk or milk alternative should work (rice milk might not, it tends to be a bit watery). You'll also notice a lot of use of salt, but this can be left out if you don't crave it like I do! Because these recipes have evolved, not all of them have quantities yet!

I've tried to mark those which freeze well. If they aren't labelled as such it doesn't mean they won't freeze, it just means I've never tried so don't know!

Vegan/gluten free/vegetarian

I've tried to mark up where things are vegan etc and obviously any reference to dairy products such as butter means a dairy free version although you can use dairy if you want. When using packaged ingredients, make sure to double check that they meet your dietary requirements as you can find things like milk powder hidden in places you'd never have suspected!

Equipment

Everyone will differ and obviously so will everyone's finances, but here is a list of the equipment that I have or want and would recommend to others:

- Electric knife
- Food processor with lots of options – mine has a whisk setting, grater setting, slicing setting, mixing setting, kneading setting and also turns into a blender.
- Slow cooker
- Microwave
- Large handled implements including cutlery
- Light pots and pans (if you're up to using them) and/or a bamboo steamer
- Plastic plates and bowls (if carrying food is an issue these are very helpful and there are some nice melamine ones out there!)
- Dishwasher (you can get table top dishwashers if you don't have much space. Mine was from a friend who found it second hand for £25 so they don't have to be a fortune)

Where possible, get equipment that can go in a dishwasher! It means you'll be much more likely to use it if you know you can clean up easily.

Tips

Food

Frozen fruit and vegetables are your friends. They are often cheaper than fresh versions and most importantly come ready cooked. You can also get frozen rice which you just pop in the microwave.

Different supermarkets sell different ranges so shop around.

Always have soup in the house!
Check you can open it on bad days and enlist the help of a ring pull device or an electric tin opener.

Use half prepared options, like readymade pizza bases. This means that you'll still get to do some of your own cooking but you won't have to do all the work.

Ask friends and family to cook the odd meal for you, especially if they've got a signature dish!

Cook in bulk and freeze a portion.

Jus-roll sell excellent pastry and a lot of it is vegan. They also do dairy free croissants in a can, dairy free pain au chocolate in a can and dairy free garlic bread in a can. Depending on whether or not you can open the can, or have someone to open it for you, this is an option for a partly home cooked meal.

Ready to use tubes or jars of garlic, ginger, lemongrass, chilli etc is just as good as the stuff you slice yourself. Frozen herbs and spices are also excellent. Different supermarkets have different products.

Don't forget – a lot of cake recipes are suitable for freezing! As a general rule, freeze before icing them.

Use tinned beans and pulses if you can afford it. Your life is probably hard enough without having to plan ahead for soaking time. And for me, brain fog makes that a complete no!

Preparation

Make things slowly, bit by bit eg make sauce in the morning, then the pasta in the afternoon.

If you're having a really awful day, you have no ready meals and you have no one to help, get a takeaway. Yes they are expensive and not generally the healthiest option but you do need to eat.

Don't peel things unless you absolutely feel you need to.

If you live with someone, share the cooking.

Use gadgets and thingamebobs to make life easier eg dycem jar and bottle openers.

Cut packages open with scissors; don't stress your hands trying to do it manually.

Use your food process to slice or grate batches of cheese, put them in a tub and keep them refrigerated, that way you can just grab a handful when needed. Cheese also freezes so you can freeze it ready grated.

Swap skills eg someone cooks for you and in return you babysit.

Set out your ingredients in front of you before you begin so you don't need to go back and forth.

Other

Do your shopping online and get it delivered. I also use a range of supermarkets so that I get variety eg one sells great dried fruit but not frozen butternut squash. If you ask nicely, many will bring it straight into your kitchen and I suspect some would even put it away for you. Something I should really check out as my shopping gets left on the floor for weeks...!

Keep your knives sharp. A blunt knife will just make your life harder and more painful.

Friends are amazing and often want to help but don't know how. Help them out by asking for something specific! I have a chalkboard of things I need help with in my kitchen so people can choose whether they want to or what they want to help with. It ranges from opening a new jar to changing the bed to unloading the dishwasher. I struggle to ask for help and to remember what I need help with and the chalkboard has been excellent for that.

Take breaks between tasks and do things slowly.

If you don't have a dishwasher, soak things before washing them.

There's lots of advice online about making sure your kitchen is set out ergonomically, and if you can sit, make sure you sit.

Head, shoulders, knees and toes...

Pay attention to how you treat different parts of your body when you're cooking (or doing anything else for that matter).

Hands

My hands are the worst part of my body so a lot of these recipes have minimal hand involvement. Take things slowly, don't do things you don't have to and it's ok to cheat. Chunkier equipment tends to be easier on the hands. Avoid repetitive actions such as whisking. Don't lift things off the hob, use a table spoon or large serving spoon to put the food on a plate. Get a friendly person to move pans later.

Shoulders

Be aware of where you keep things. Don't overstretch.

Back, knees, hips and ankles

Have a stool or a chair in the kitchen or take your cooking to a table. Do as much as you can sitting down. It sounds obvious but it's easy to get caught up doing something whilst standing at a worktop. Be careful of posture as you stand.

Having a carpet on the kitchen floor will make it easier if you have to stand to prepare food.

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Veggies and sides

Side dishes can make perfectly acceptable meals if the portion size is scaled up, just make sure your overall diet is balanced. Poor diet will not be helpful for your pain.

Steamed broccoli (vegan, gluten free)

Broccoli

Water

Add your pre-chopped broccoli to a microwavable bowl or container, add a bit of water and microwave for 1-3 minutes or until desired softness. Lots of other things can be steamed using this method eg cauliflower, green beans etc.

Ginger broccoli (vegan option, gluten free)

Broccoli

Garlic paste

Ginger paste

Fish sauce (leave out if vegan but you might want to replace with something salty such as soy sauce!)

Steam your broccoli. Fry a teaspoon of garlic and a teaspoon of ginger in a frying pan for a few seconds then add the broccoli and stir. Leave for a couple of minutes then pour on a splash of fish sauce and serve.

Wilted spinach (vegan, gluten free)

Spinach

Water

Put the spinach in a microwavable container with a little water, remembering that spinach shrinks down a LOT. Microwave for 1- 2 minutes. Sometimes I add lemon juice as well.

Asparagus (vegan, gluten free)

Asparagus (preferably with the woody part of the stalk already cut off)

Knob of butter

Salt and pepper

Add your asparagus, a splash of water, butter, salt and pepper to a microwavable tub. Microwave for a minute, take it out and give it a little shake then put back in for a minute.

Jacket Potatoes (vegan, gluten free)

Baking potato or sweet potato

Microwave or oven bake as preferred. You can use regular potatoes or sweet potatoes. Serve with your pre-grated cheese, houmous (shop bought) or whatever takes your fancy. Maybe cook a spare one so you can heat it up the next day?

Potato and spinach bake (vegan option, gluten free option)

One large potato or several smaller ones – don't bother peeling it

50-100g spinach

30g grated cheese

3 tablespoons flour

50ml milk

Salt and pepper

Use your food processor to slice the potatoes then boil for 10 minutes until they start to soften. Leave to cool. Once cooled, add a layer to your baking dish. Sprinkle on salt, pepper and flour then layer on spinach (remember it will wilt down) and half the cheese. Add another layer of potato, pour milk over it and sprinkle on the rest of the cheese. Bake for about 40 minutes. You might need to put some foil over it if the top starts to burn.

Alternatives:

Swede version – Instead of potato, use 100g swede and leave out the spinach, makes a good side dish to serve with veggie sausages

Squash version – Instead of potato, use 100g sliced squash. Note – the squash doesn't need boiling

Difficulty – cutting the potato/swede/squash so that it fits into the food processor to be sliced, handling pans when boiling the potato/swede. To get round this, add the veg to a wire basket in the saucepan to limit what you are lifting.

Freezes well. If you freeze it in foil takeaway boxes then you can just put it in the oven once it's defrosted.

Cauliflower cheese (vegan option, gluten free option)

If I could make or buy dairy free cheese sauce the cauliflower cheese would be on the list! If you're lucky enough to be able to make or buy cheese sauce... You can make cheese sauce in a microwave if it's the pan that cause you problems, you still need to whisk though.

Throw pre-chopped cauliflower into a baking dish (if you're cooking for more than one, it's easier to use several small dishes than one large one) and pour the sauce over, sprinkle on pre-grated cheese! Excellent for reheating and freezing. Goes well with veggie sausages and mushrooms.

Difficulty – stirring/whisking for the white sauce

Garlic bread (vegan)

French stick

Butter

Garlic paste

Mix the garlic paste and butter, you could add some herbs as well if you like. Slice the French stick widthways but not all the way through (if you were cutting all the way through you'd get lots of small circles). Use a blunt knife to squeeze garlic butter between the cuts. Wrap in foil and put in the oven at 180 for 10-20 minutes. Check on it after 10 and if the butter hasn't melted it needs longer.

Nachos (vegan, gluten free)

Tortilla chips

Grated cheese

Jalapeño peppers (in a jar)

Salt (optional)

Mix the above and pop in the microwave or oven till the cheese melts.

Difficulty – opening the jar, on bad days I use chilli flakes instead

Cheesy Rice (gluten free)

My housemate at uni mocked me for this! Essentially just microwave your rice, tip it into a frying pan with a touch of oil and stir in pre-grated cheese. It's ready when the cheese has melted and it's all gooey. This is definitely comfort food!

Difficulty – lifting the frying pan and stirring in the cheese

Bean salad (vegan, gluten free)

A tin of beans eg cannellini or kidney beans

Oil

Garlic paste

Mixed herbs

Other veggies (optional)

Drain a tin of beans, drizzle on some oil and stir in the garlic paste and mixed herbs. Voila, one bean salad! You could add things like roasted peppers, spinach, watercress etc if you want.

Lots of vegetables can be microwaved (often with a little bit of water), use the internet to find out the best way.

Main meals

Baked Eggs (gluten free)

3 eggs

Approximately two tablespoons of milk

Vegetables eg broccoli (enough to fill the base of your dish)

Make sure to spray or rub oil on the dish first! Mix 3 eggs with a little bit of milk and some seasoning. It doesn't have to be well mixed, just enough to break up the yolks. Pour over some vegetables (I've used slightly steamed broccoli but peppers and other veggies would work and adding cheese is always good too!) and bake for 30 minutes at 180 or until set. Serve with garlic bread.

Serves 2 as a side, 1 as a main.

Difficulty – lifting the dish in and out the oven

Thai Infused Butternut Squash Soup (Vegan option, gluten free)

100g pre-cut butternut squash

Lemongrass paste

Chilli powder

Lime juice

Fish sauce

Cook the squash on the hob in a light pan, just cover the squash with water. Add water to the pan once it's in place using a small container. You might want to boil the squash in a wire basket so it's easier to get out again.

When it's nearly tender and most of the water has evaporated, stir in the rest of the ingredients. Once cooled, blend. Then season to taste.

Difficulty – lifting pan

Freezes well

Butternut squash and red lentil soup (Vegan, gluten free)

Pre-cut butternut squash

Red lentils

Cook the squash on the hob in a light pan, just cover the squash with water. After about 10 minutes, add the red lentils. Stir and cook until the lentils are done (about 20 minutes, they will soften and become more transparent). Blend. Add preferred seasoning. Sage goes well with butternut squash.

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Difficulty – lifting the pan, don't require much stirring, just make sure they don't stick to the bottom of the pan

Freezes well

“Pizza” (no tomatoes for me!)

Pizza base

Grated cheese

Presliced peppers

Presliced mushrooms

Lots of dried herbs

Salt and pepper

Cover your pizza base with cheese then add veggies, sprinkle on herbs and seasoning. Cook at 180 for 15-20 minutes.

Difficultly - slicing it afterwards. Having a very sharp knife or a lovely friend on hand is helpful, and then eat with your fingers!

If you must, add some tomato puree... just don't tell me!

Bengali Butternut Squash with Chickpeas (Vegan, gluten free)

500g frozen butternut squash

A bay leaf

Pinch of chilli flakes

Pinch of onion powder

One teaspoon each of: turmeric, cumin powder, coriander powder, ground ginger, fennel seed, garam masala and mustard seeds

Pinch of salt

Chickpeas

Oil

Add a bit of oil to a high edged baking tray, add the butternut squash and put in the oven at 180 for 10 minutes. Turn the squash over and sprinkle on half the spice mix. You might need to add a bit of oil. Stir so the spice mix covers the squash evenly. Cook for 20 minutes. Add the chickpeas and the remaining spice mix. Stir again. Cook for another 10-20 minutes until the squash is roasted. It's not an exact science

and it will cope with a bit of over cooking. Essentially you just want the squash to be softened all the way through. You could add some spinach in the last couple of minutes.

Serve with microwaveable rice and popadoms

Lemon and coriander lentils (Vegan, gluten free)

Red lentils

Salt and pepper

Garlic paste

Cumin powder

Coriander powder

Lemon juice

Chopped coriander (frozen is good)

Put a saucepan on the heat and pour in the cumin powder, coriander powder, salt, pepper and add garlic paste. Once they've started to heat, add your lentils. Stir them into the spices and once well stirred, add enough water to cover the lentils. Stir occasionally and keep an eye on the water, you will probably need to top it up. At the end, you want to end up with no excess water. You'll know it's ready because the lentils will be soft and light in colour, normally takes about 20 minutes. Stir in a splash of lemon juice and the chopped coriander.

Serve with rice

Difficulty – lifting the pan, don't require much stirring, just make sure they don't stick to the bottom of the pan

Freezes well

Chickpea, lentil and spinach curry (vegan, gluten free)

70g red lentils per person

80g chickpeas per person

Lots of spinach

Per person, roughly: half a clove of garlic, half a teaspoon of... turmeric, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, ground coriander, garam masala, tiny amount of chilli powder (tip of a spoon)

Lemon juice

Fresh coriander

Fry garlic, turmeric, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, ground coriander, ground cumin, chilli powder into a paste. Stir in lentils. Add water to cover lentils. Keep stirring. After five minutes add chickpeas. You might need to add more water as the lentils absorb it. Once the lentils have cooked down (15-20 mins after putting them on), taste it. It might need a pinch of salt or some more cumin or coriander. Stir in spinach. It will wilt down a lot so you'll need more than you think. Stir through a splash of lemon juice and some fresh chopped coriander.

Serve with rice and chapatti.

Freezes well.

Difficulty – stirring. Make sure you serve using a spoon rather than carrying or tipping the saucepan as it can get very heavy depending on how many you're cooking for!

Nasi Goreng (Vegan option)

Nasi goreng paste (Chinese supermarkets are good for this but you'll find it in large supermarkets)

Microwaveable sticky rice

Egg

Grated carrot (use your food processor)

Fine green beans (buy ready to use)

Light soy sauce

Sweet soy sauce

Microwave your rice. Add 2 teaspoons of nasi goreng paste to a frying pan. Heat. After a minute or so, stir in the rice. Add the grated carrot and stir. Add the beans and stir. Once your beans are at your preferred tenderness, stir in a splash of light soy sauce and a splash of sweet soy sauce.

Whilst you're preparing your rice, fry and egg.

Serve the rice with a fried egg on top.

Note – you might want to add a little extra garlic paste or ginger paste depending on the nasi goreng paste you're using and your personal taste

Difficulty – stirring the rice, frying the egg, trying to manage different things at once

Baked mushrooms with sweet potato chips (Vegan, gluten free)

Shop bought sweet potato chips (Waitrose do good ones)

Large mushroom

Grated cheese

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Bread roll

Cook the sweet potato chips according to instructions. Fry or grill the mushroom. You could add some garlic butter (garlic paste mixed with butter) or mixed herbs.

Add some grated cheese and serve with a bread roll.

Beanburgers (Vegan option)

Your preferred type of beans – I use cannellini

Breadcrumbs

Egg (beaten – this binds them, if you're leaving it out, add a bit of oil instead)

Salt and pepper, other seasoning optional (eg chilli flakes, mixed herbs etc)

Put everything in your food processor and blend. Shape into burgers, dust with flour and fry. You could also grill them, just spray or brush some oil on them.

Great with chips.

Freezes well

Pasties

Cut pre-made puff pastry into rectangles (twice the size you want the pasty to be), on one half add some cheese, pre-sliced peppers and other fillings leaving a 1cm gap around the three outside edges. Fold the other half of the pastry over the top. Pierce the top of the pastry and pinch the edges together. You could brush with beaten egg if you want it to go golden. Bake for 20-20 minutes. Be careful, the cheese will be hot!!

Fish

Lemon and dill salmon (Gluten free)

Salmon fillet

Dried dill

Lemon slices

Take a boned salmon fillet, sprinkle on some dill then lay lemon slices on top. Place on tin foil on a baking tray for 10-15 minutes in a preheated oven at 180. Serve with rocket.

Difficulty - slicing the lemon.

Lemon salmon with wilted spinach (Gluten free)

Very similar to the previous recipe but no slicing required.

Oil

Chilli

Salt and pepper

Lemon juice

Salmon fillet

Mix a little oil, chopped chilli, salt, pepper and lemon juice (pre juiced and in a bottle). Brush onto the salmon. Grill. Serve with wilted spinach.

Salmon en papillote (Gluten free)

Salmon

Lemon juice (or white wine would work)

Knob of butter

Salt, pepper, herbs

Place a salmon fillet on parchment paper, sprinkle with salt, pepper, lemon juice and herbs (dill, fennel or parsley would work well). Add a knob of butter to the top and finish wrapping in parchment. Bake for 20 minutes.

Difficulty – wrapping the paper can be fiddly. I think foil works as well and that might be easier.

Steamed fish (Gluten free)

Use your bamboo steamer to steam fish

One pan pasta with tuna, spinach and cheese

Preferred pasta, enough for two people

One tin of tuna, drained

A couple of handfuls of cheese

Half a bag of spinach

Salt, pepper and mixed herbs

Cook the pasta as required. Drain. Add a bit of oil to the pan and put it back on the heat. Add the tuna and stir. After a couple of minutes add the seasoning and cheese. After a minute or so, add the spinach and stir.

Makes two portions – it reheats well in the microwave.

Difficulty – opening tuna, draining pasta, lifting pans and stirring.

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Throwing whatever leftover veggies you have on hand in a pan of drained or leftover pasta with a bit of oil and cheese makes a simple one pan meal if you're up to it

Desserts

Desserts with tinned or frozen fruit (Vegan, gluten free)

Tinned fruit and shop bought meringues make a yummy dessert, add cream or ice cream if you fancy.

Difficulty – opening tins. A lot of fruit comes in tin with a ring pull and you can get a device to make this easier and if there's no ring pull then use an electric tin opener.

Meringues (Gluten free)

2 egg whites

4oz caster sugar

Add the sugar and egg whites to your food processor and use the whisk setting until they form a stiff mixture. Use a teaspoon to drop small amounts onto a lined baking tray to make lots of mini meringues. Bake at 120 for 2 hours (the key is to bake on a low temperature for a long time). You'll be tempted to take them out too early. If you do, they'll be very chewy which is fine if that's how you like your meringues; I prefer them light and crispy.

Food processor lemon shortbread (Vegan, gluten free option)

100g butter

50g sugar

Zest of one lemon

175g plain flour

½ teaspoon baking powder

Line a baking tray with baking parchment and preheat the oven to 180. Put all the ingredients in your food processor and mix until it forms a large ball. At this stage you've got options about how much effort you put in:

- Roll into 10 balls, flatten and put on baking tray
- Roll out and cut into shapes
- Tip the ball into your baking tray and use the heel of your hand to flatten. Then slice into rectangles

Bake for about 15 minutes until slightly golden.

Works well with gluten free flour and baking powder.

Difficulty – grating a lemon. You could make it without lemon or use a splash of lemon juice instead. You could add chocolate chips or dried fruit instead.

Most cake can be made by putting all the ingredients in a food processor. Try it with your favourite recipes.

Smoothies (Vegan, gluten free)

I've never really got into smoothies but I know a lot of people do like them and if you have a blender it's very easy – throw your fruit into the blender and press go! Tips – use frozen fruit or pre-prepared fruit.

Not really a recipe...

Don't forget about the basics! Brain fog often means I miss the obvious!

Not really a recipe...toast

Be creative with toast toppings to make it into more of a meal eg houmous, egg, cheese, butter beans etc.

Not really a recipe... sausage sandwich

Oven cook your preferred sausages (mine are obviously veggie!) rather than pan fry as this is easier on your hands.

Not really a recipe... takeaway leftovers

Just be careful, reheat well. Be cautious with rice, make sure it's hot all the way through and don't reheat more than once.

Not really a recipe... use a falafel mix

Prepare according to instructions. Serve with pitta bread and couscous

Not really a recipe...fishfinger sandwich

Excellent comfort food!

Not really a recipe... roasted vegetables

Drizzle some oil in a baking tray then add pre-cut vegetables such as squash, sweet potatoes, cauliflower, asparagus, carrots, swede, parsnip, peppers etc

Season and roast for about 50 minutes at 200 until softened. You could add some minced garlic towards the end and some herbs.

Not really a recipe... cheese toasties

Get creative with the filling! Add tuna, bacon (if you eat meat), prawns, veggies etc for a more filling meal.

Not really a recipe... cheese on toast

If you want something a bit different, add garlic butter or pesto between the bread and the cheese or use fancy bread.

Not a recipe... hot chocolate

I'm quite fussy about hot chocolate, I don't like the powdered taste and often can't stir it in anyway but Oatly Chocolate Oat Milk is perfect. Just pour into your mug and microwave for about 2 minutes!

Other foods to consider

Omlettes, noodles, couscous, porridge, add other ingredients to cake mix, eggy bread, slow cooker meals (I don't have a slow cooker yet so I have no recipes for one!)

Some final words...

Ultimately, everyone's pain is different and you will have to find what works for you and this is likely to change from day to day. I hope that I've been able to give you some inspiration, ideas and tips to help get you cooking again.

This is a work in progress and if you've got any suggestions or feedback, just email heiyork@gmail.com.

Thanks, and best of luck in the future.

Helen

Ps. There's the usual disclaimer, I'm not responsible if any of the above recipes cause you pain. Also remember that microwaves and ovens all have their own personalities so cooking times etc may vary!