

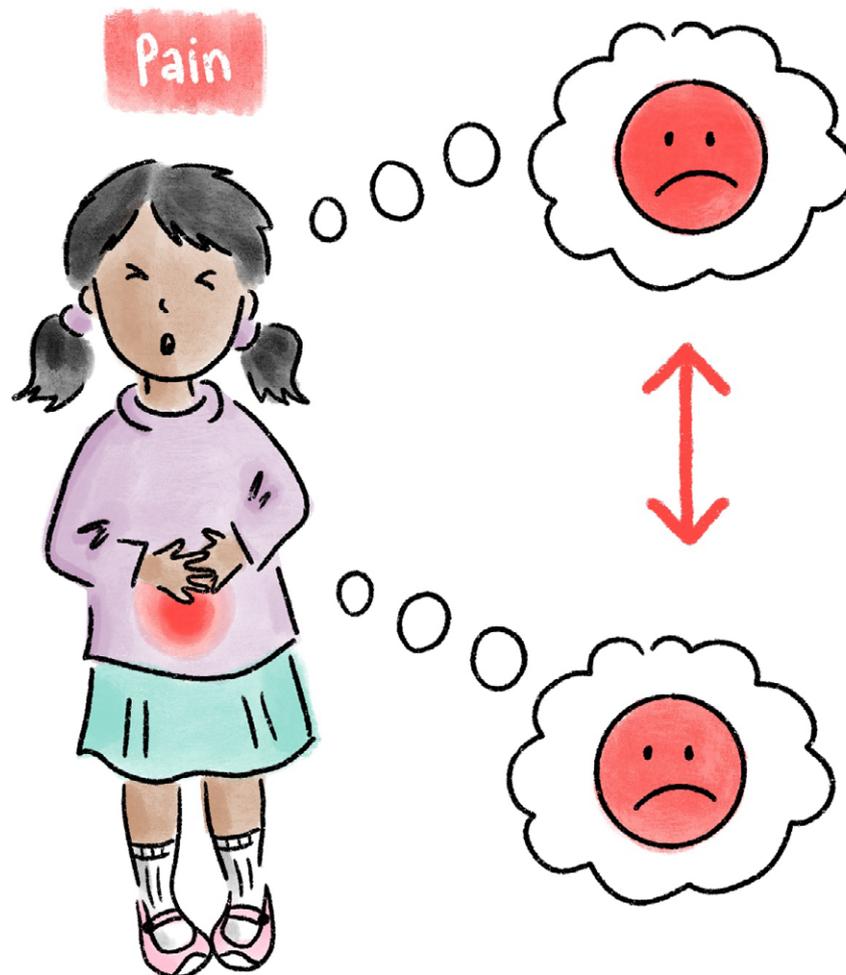
Recurrent Abdominal Pain

Information for parents and carers

Key facts

Recurrent abdominal pain (RAP) is a stomach ache that lasts a long time or that keeps coming back.

Usually recurrent abdominal pain is due to an extra sensitivity of the digestive system and there is no underlying physical reason for this to happen. In this situation it is referred to as 'functional abdominal pain'.

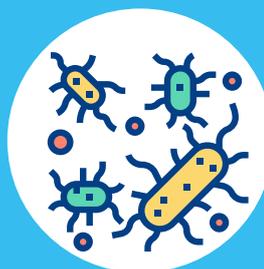




Recurrent abdominal pain is one of the most common symptoms in childhood worldwide



About 10-20% of school aged children report episodes of abdominal pain



Most children will have no physical blockage, infection or inflammation causing the pain



When fully investigated, only 8 out of 100 children with recurrent abdominal pain will have a treatable physical cause or disease



It can have a major impact on your child's day and can become a common reason for missing school



This time can be worrying for parents as they fear there must be something seriously wrong with their child.



Recurrent pain at other sites such as headaches or limb pain is common too and will be looked into at the same time as the abdominal pain

Common symptom combinations involving abdominal pain include;

Functional Abdominal Pain

Pain that happens from time to time or is continuous and does not appear to come from a particular physical cause. Often this pain is felt in the central tummy area.



Central abdominal pain

Functional Abdominal Pain Syndrome (FAPS)

Is functional abdominal pain as well as some loss of daily activities. Other symptoms such as headaches, limb pain or difficulty sleeping.



Headache



Limb pain



Difficulty sleeping

Functional dyspepsia

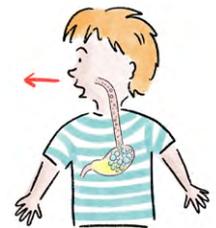
Pain or discomfort in the upper abdomen (above belly button) that recurs or persists.



Upper abdominal pain



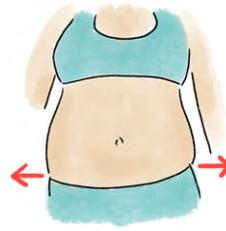
Heartburn



Belching

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

IBS causes bloating with loose stools and abdominal pain. Symptoms include change in frequency and appearance of poo. Pain or discomfort lessens after pooing.



Bloating



Central abdominal pain



Loose stools



More stools

Abdominal Migraine

Times of intense acute pain around belly button lasting one or more hours where symptoms may worsen or appear suddenly. This can interfere with some activities. This can also cause reduced appetite, feeling sick, vomiting, headache, light hurting the eyes, looking pale.



Feels sick



Central abdominal pain



Pale



Reduced appetite



Vomiting



Headache



Light sensitivity

Issues that can be linked to recurrent abdominal pain include



Health worries in the first year of child's life



Illness in siblings

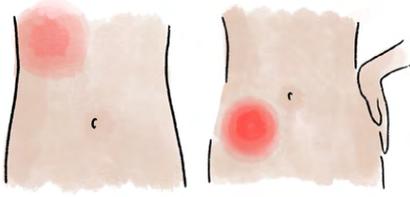


Gastrointestinal problems in parents



In rare cases, RAP may be a symptom of child abuse

Features that might suggest a physical cause of recurrent abdominal pain



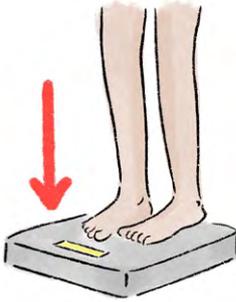
Persistent right upper or right lower abdominal pain



Back pain



Urinary symptoms



Unintentional weight loss



Delayed puberty



Blood in poo



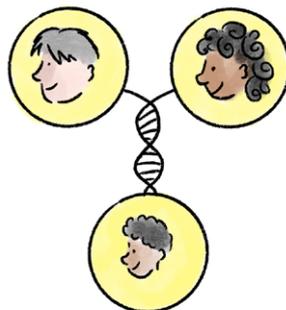
Chronic severe diarrhoea



Unexplained fever



Persistent vomiting, especially green bile or blood in vomit



First degree relative with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) such as Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and indeterminate colitis



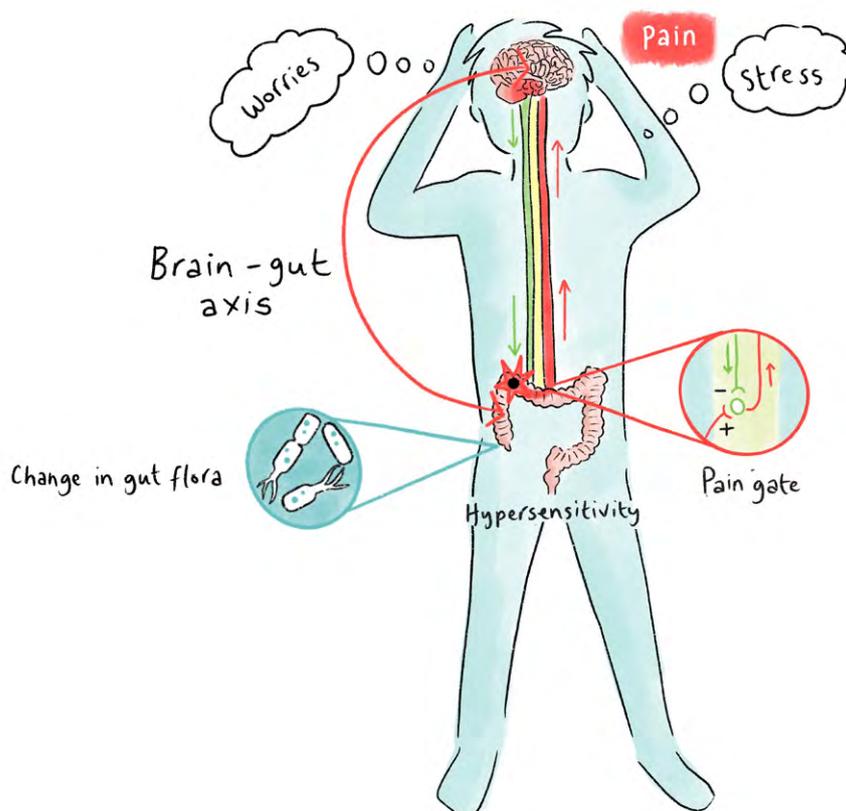
If any of these are present you should seek medical advice

Conditions linked to RAP that could appear in later life

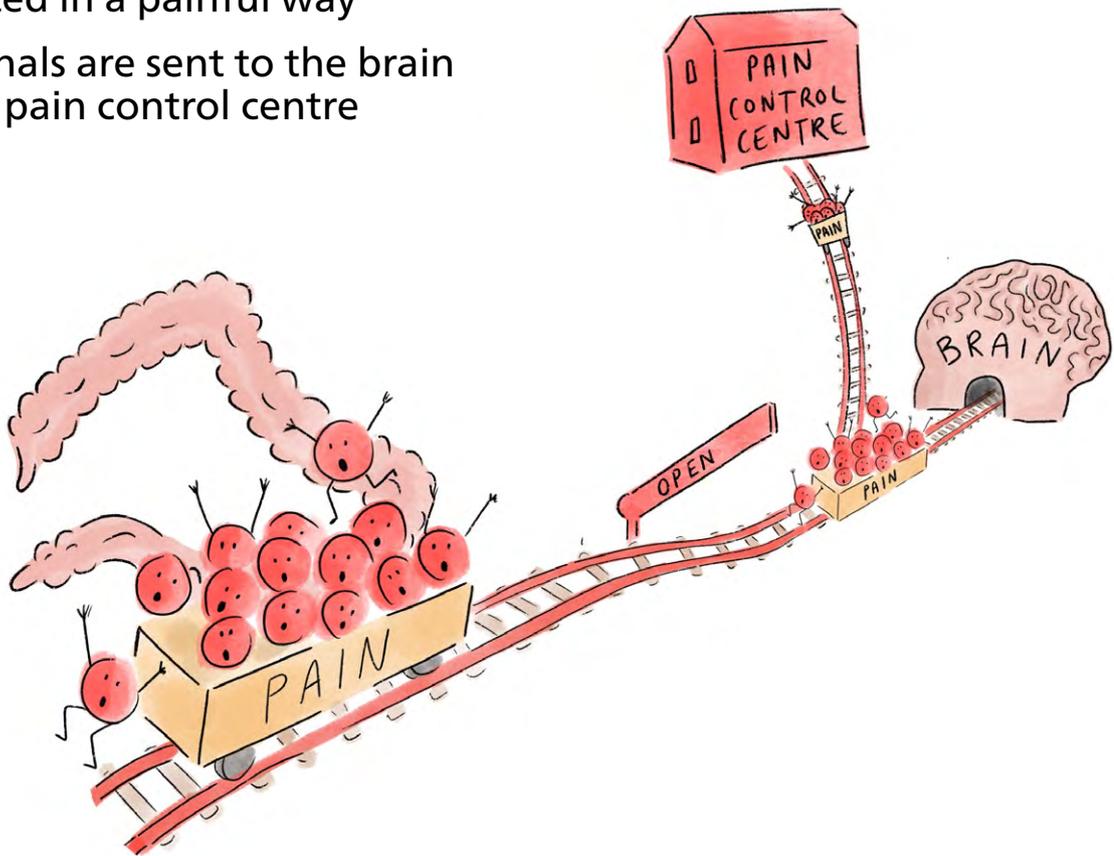
- There is a link between having long lasting (chronic) abdominal pain as a child and developing IBS as an adult, especially in girls
- There is a risk of later emotional symptoms and psychiatric disorders particularly anxiety disorders.
- There has been shown to be links between abdominal pain in childhood and eating disorders later in life.

What causes functional abdominal pain?

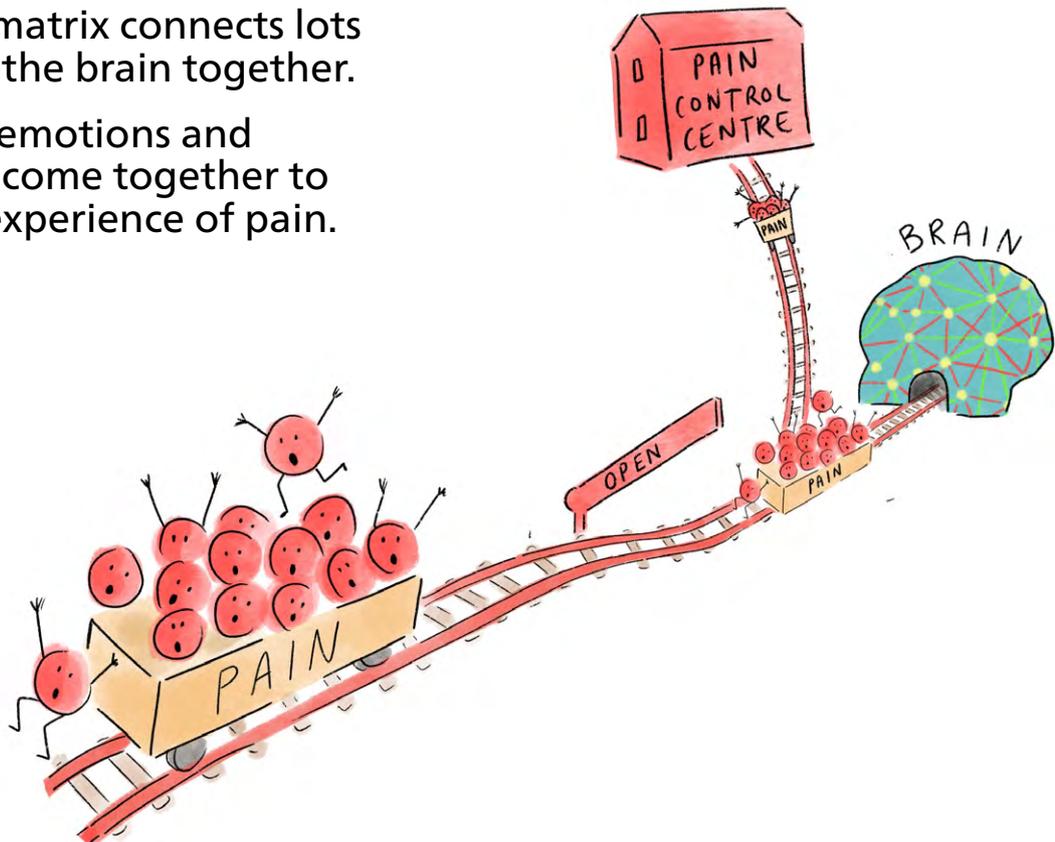
- Although the condition has been extensively studied, we are still unsure of the exact cause. It does seem that in some children, the nerves in their gut become very sensitive and pain is experienced even though the intestines are functioning normally.
- The gut and the brain communicate to regulate health and disease through a connection called the brain-gut axis.
- We all need a healthy and diverse combination of bacteria in our gut, known as gut flora. Sometimes after a mild illness, this important balance can be disturbed, leading to hypersensitivity of the bowel wall.
- Triggers that don't normally cause pain such as stretching or bloating can trigger a pain signal to be sent to the brain if the bowel wall is sensitive.
- Often the brain will recognise that this is just a normal stretching sensation, and send a message back to the bowel which turns off the pain signal by closing the pain gate.
- Sometimes, when children feel worried it can prevent these pain signals from getting filtered out and the pain gate stays open. So when the bowel has the sensation of stretching, a pain signal is sent to the brain and the child feels abdominal pain.



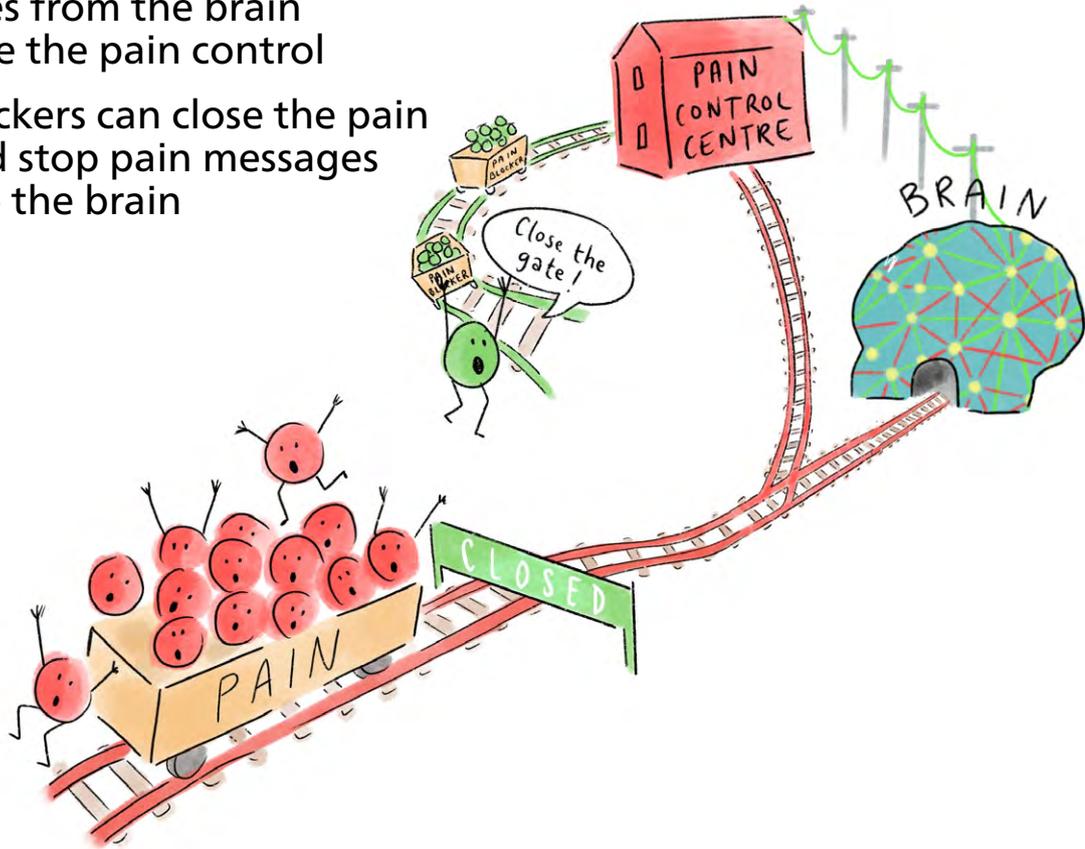
1. A part of the bowel is stimulated in a painful way
2. Pain signals are sent to the brain and the pain control centre



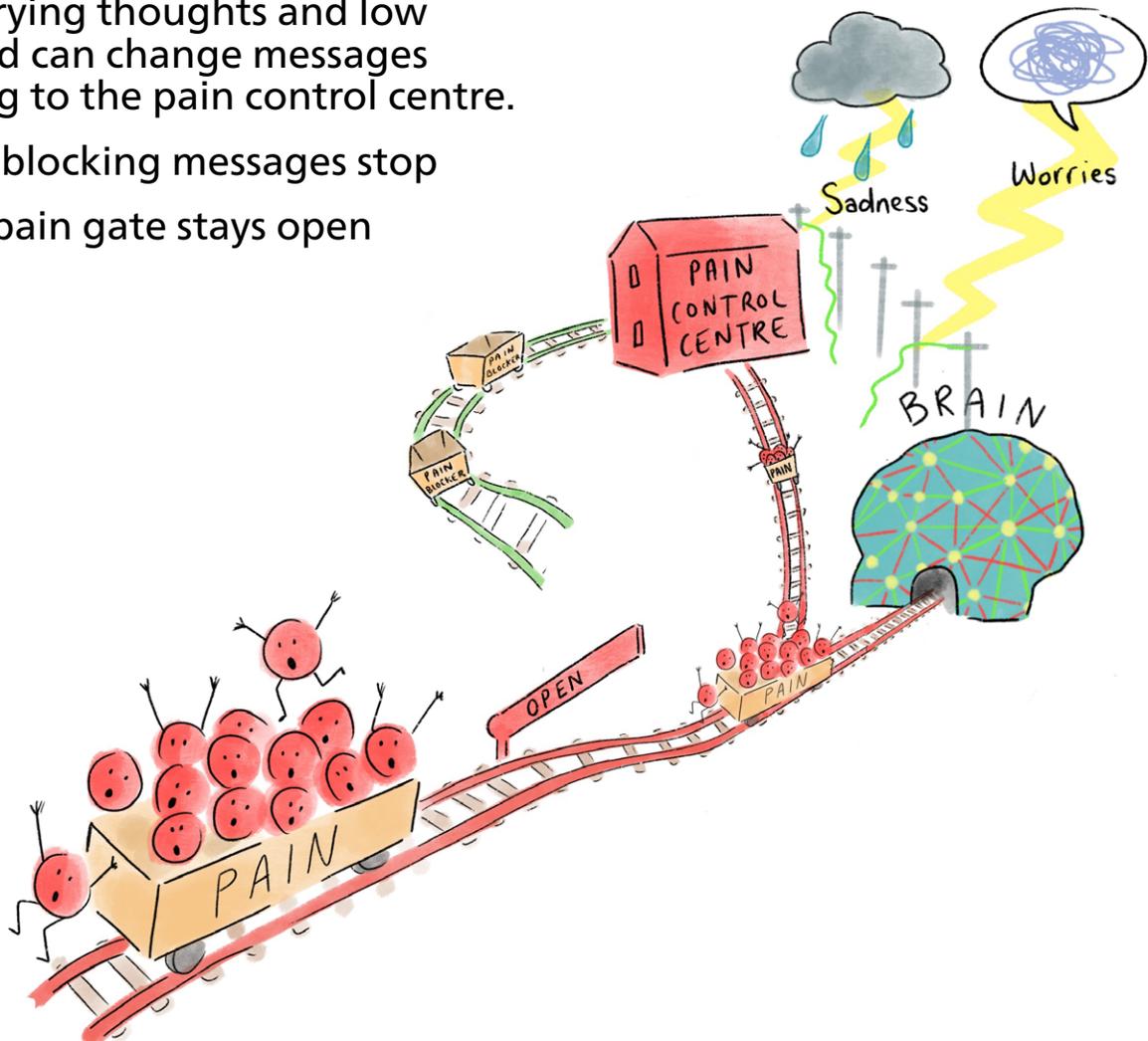
3. The neuromatrix connects lots of parts of the brain together. Thoughts, emotions and sensations come together to create an experience of pain.



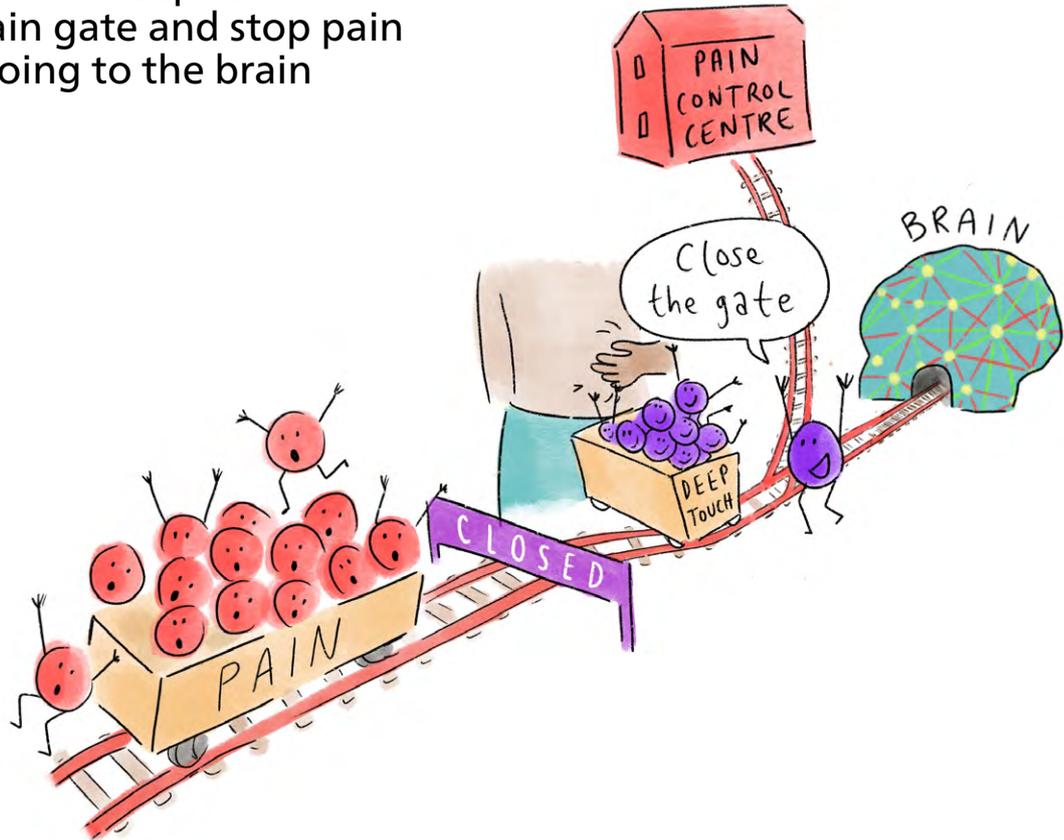
4. Messages from the brain influence the pain control
5. Pain blockers can close the pain gate and stop pain messages going to the brain



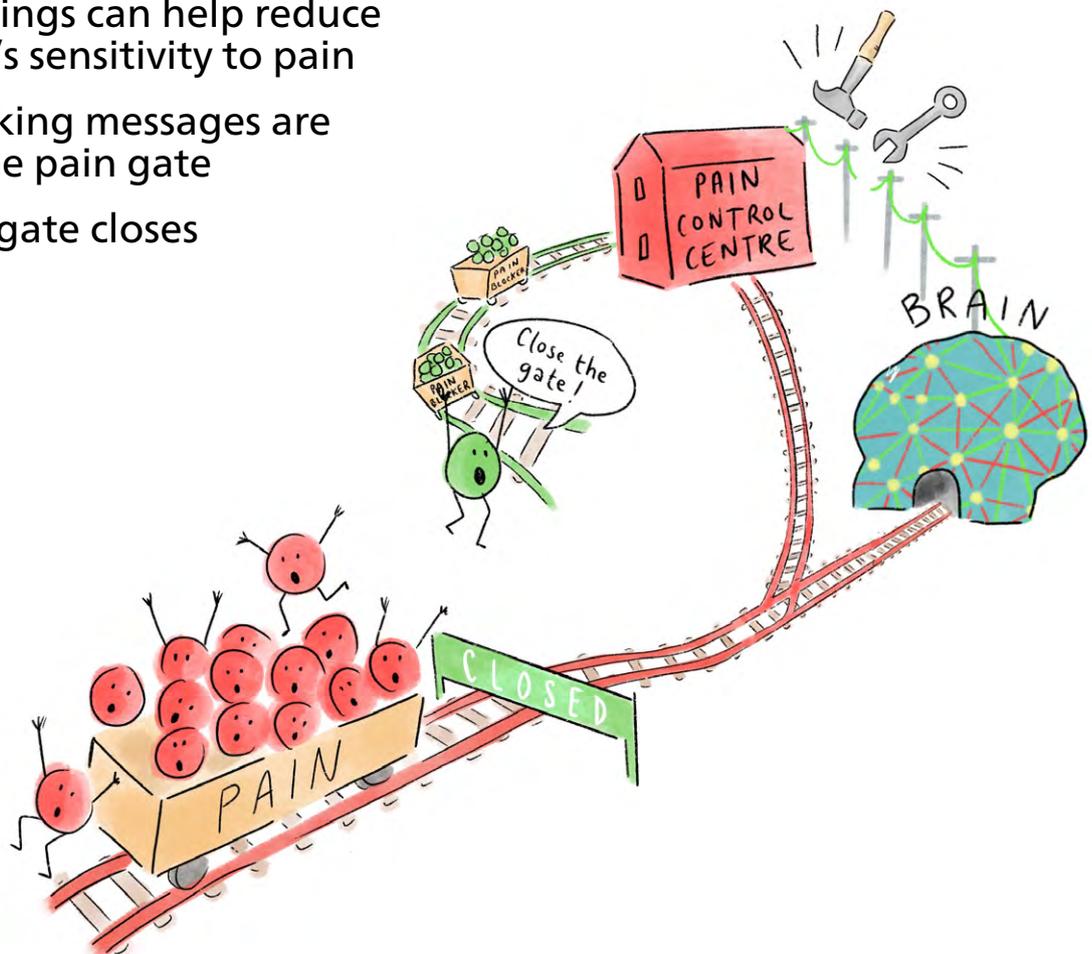
6. Worrying thoughts and low mood can change messages going to the pain control centre.
7. Pain blocking messages stop
8. The pain gate stays open



9. The sensation of deep touch can close the pain gate and stop pain messages going to the brain



10. Lots of things can help reduce the brain's sensitivity to pain
11. Pain blocking messages are sent to the pain gate
12. The pain gate closes



Caring for your child at home



You may wish to think about possible triggers in your child's diet, such as the artificial sweetener sorbitol, fizzy drinks and caffeine.



Maintain a healthy weight



Eat a balanced diet with plenty of veg and fibre. Moderate the amount of fruit and fruit juice, the high fructose content can cause abdominal pain if intake is too much.



Keep active, exercise helps your food move through your bowels.



Distraction can be useful, for example, a trip to the park, having a bath or something else your child enjoys.



Apart from occasional pain relief medications are not helpful.



How is Functional abdominal pain diagnosed?

You will be asked questions about your child's diet, bowel habit and general health. Your child's growth will also be reviewed.



Based on this assessment, sometimes your doctor may arrange for some blood tests to rule out serious, but much less common, conditions. They may also ask for a sample of blood, urine or poo for testing.



Sometimes an abdominal ultrasound can be helpful. An ultrasound machine uses sound waves to form images of different organs within the child's body.

What treatment is available?

- This condition takes time to manage and you may need more than one appointment with your doctor. Your GP may refer your child to secondary care (paediatrics). There is not enough evidence of a specific treatment or intervention being useful. A large part of management involves discussion, explanation and reassurance rather than treatment or intervention.
- It is important that you and your child understand there is no physical abnormality which is causing their pain. Anxiety about a possible underlying disease, or focusing on the pain, will make it worse. This does not mean you should ignore the condition, but to offer reassurance and distraction rather than reinforce it.
- For a younger child, it may be helpful to explain to them that their tummy is very sensitive and sometimes hurts as the food goes around the bends.
- An older child may be able to understand the information about what causes functional abdominal pain.
- It is important that you do not allow the condition to change your child's social activities or allow it to become a reason for missing school. Even when the pain persists, it is reassuring to learn that this is a known condition, and that it is not dangerous. Being positive about getting better will send the right message to your child.

Mindfulness activities can be helpful for some children



Here is a video you can share with your child that explains recurrent abdominal pain: [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)