

Other Ways to Help Relieve Pain

Some people use methods other than medicine to help relieve pain. Others use these methods along with medicine. These approaches can help lower pain, improve comfort, and increase a sense of control.

Some of these methods include:

- Relaxation
- Imagery
- Distraction
- Skin stimulation

Your care team can teach you how to use these techniques. Friends or family members can help support you as well.

Relaxation

Relaxation helps reduce pain by lowering muscle tension. This can prevent pain from getting worse. Relaxation can also help you fall asleep, improve energy, and reduce fatigue. Many people feel less anxious when they are relaxed. When combined with pain medicine, relaxation can do a better job at relieving pain faster.

Tips

How well you relax may change each time. You cannot force yourself to relax. Try different methods until you find one that works for you then use that same method so it becomes easy and routine. Use this method least 5-10 minutes twice a day.

Check your body from head to toe for tension during the day. Try to relax any tense muscles. Use a quick technique such as inhale/tense, exhale/relax. This is explained later.

Listen to your body if you feel dizzy or breathless, stop right away.. If you have any lung problems, check with your doctor before using any deep breathing techniques.

Find a Comfortable Position

You can try to relax while sitting up or lying down. Choose a quiet place if you can. Close your eyes. **Do not** cross your arms and legs because that may cut off circulation and cause numbness or tingling. If you are lying down, put a small pillow under your neck and under your knees to provide comfort.

Visual Concentration and Rhythmic Massage

Open your eyes and stare at an object, or close your eyes and think of a peaceful, calm scene. With the palm of your hand, massage near where the pain is in a circular, firm manner. **Avoid** red, raw, swollen, or tender areas. You can ask a family member or friend to do this for you.

Breathing Exercises

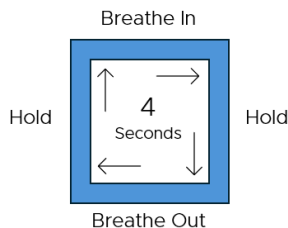
Inhale/Tense, Exhale/Relax

1. Breathe in (inhale) deeply. At the same time, tense your muscles or a group of muscles. For instance, you can squeeze your eyes shut, frown, clench your teeth, make a fist, stiffen your arms and legs or draw up your arms and legs as tightly as you can.
2. Hold your breath and keep your muscles tense for a second or two.
3. Breathe out (exhale) and let your body go limp.

Slow Rhythmic Breathing

1. Focus on an object, your breathing, or a calm scene.
2. Breathe in slowly and tense a muscle group.
3. Breathe out and relax that muscle group.
4. Continue breathing slowly and comfortably, about 9 to 12 breaths per minute.
5. As you breathe out, you may silently say, "In, one, two. Out, one, two."
6. To finish, count silently from one to three, open your eyes, and say, "I feel alert and relaxed."

It may be helpful at first if someone counts out loud for you. If you feel short of breath, take one deep breath and then return to slow breathing. If some muscles remain tight, tense and relax them once or twice.



Box Breathing or Square Breathing

1. Find a quiet spot and try to get into a comfortable position.
2. Breathe out slowly and gently push air out of your lungs.
3. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose for a count of four (1, 2, 3, 4).
4. Hold your breath, keeping your lungs full, for a count of four (1, 2, 3, 4).
5. Slowly breathe out through your mouth for a count of four (1, 2, 3, 4).
6. Hold your breath with empty lungs for a count of four (1, 2, 3, 4).
7. Continue this cycle for several minutes or long as needed to feel calmer, less stressed, or more focused.

Common Problems

Severe pain can make relaxation hard. In that case, use quick methods such as visual focus with massage or inhale and tense, then exhale and relax. If you feel like you cannot get enough air, take one deep breath.

Breathing too deeply can cause shortness of breath. If this happens, breathe more slowly and shallowly. You may fall asleep during relaxation. If you want to stay awake, sit in a firm chair or set a timer.

Some people feel sad or withdrawn when relaxed. This can happen when hidden worries surface. If this occurs, talk with someone you trust. Stop any method that increases pain or makes you feel unwell. Ask your doctor or nurse for extra help if needed.

Other Methods

Try adding the other methods below to slow rhythmic breathing.

Imagery

As you breathe in, imagine the air carries a healing ball of energy to the area of pain. Picture the ball relaxing and healing that area. As you breathe out, imagine the ball leaving your body and taking the pain with it.

Breathe out naturally. Do not blow the air. Picture the ball growing larger as it removes more pain. To finish, count slowly to three, take a deep breath, open your eyes, and say, "I feel alert and relaxed." Begin moving slowly.

Visualization

Begin by getting comfortable and taking slow, deep breaths. Picture yourself in a place where you feel calm and safe, such as a favorite vacation spot. Add details like

sights, sounds, smells, and colors. Notice how your body feels in this place.

Music

Listening to music can help distract and relax you. Slow music with a beat slower than your heartbeat often feels calming for adults. Use headphones or earphones if possible.

Some people prefer faster music. Tapping to the rhythm can help you focus. You may adjust the volume to match the level of pain. This method uses little energy and may help when you feel tired.

Progressive Relaxation

Once your breathing is slow and steady, you can relax your body one part at a time. Start with your feet and move upward toward your head. As you breathe out, focus on one body part and allow it to relax.

You may think of words like heavy, loose, warm, or floating. Picture tension draining away with each breath out.

Mindfulness Meditation

This method can induce deep states of relaxation. It works like progressive relaxation and guided imagery. Yet unlike these techniques, you do not ignore physical feelings, or physical pain. Instead, you observe them from a center of calmness. The main focus would be the feelings such as pressure, burning, pulling, pulsing, etc. The focus of this method is being with things just as they are, on purpose, in the present moment. This is done to improve healing and to help you feel free from pain.

The **body scan** is a good method to start with for people with chronic pain. Lie in a comfortable position and focus on your breathing. Use your breathing to move your attention slowly through the body. Try to be aware of what you are feeling in your body.

As thoughts, feelings, and sounds come up, practice simply seeing them and letting them be as they are.

As you observe the sensations in the hurt area, notice how they are changing. Move slowly, scanning this way through your whole body as best you can. Try to stay with the physical feelings. Avoid dropping away from the “thoughts” or your reactions about the pain. How you deal with pain may begin to change, and that can impact everything.

Guided Relaxation

Ask your doctor or nurse to suggest websites or apps that you can access. These methods can often provide step-by-step instructions.

Distraction

Distraction means shifting your focus away from pain. Many people use this method without realizing it. Watching TV, listening to music, or scrolling on your phone are common examples.

Distraction works well for sudden or short pain, usually lasting 5 to 45 minutes. It can help while waiting for pain medicine to take effect. Mild pain may be distracted for longer periods. Being distracted does not mean pain is not severe.

Some people think that a person who can be distracted from pain does not have severe pain. This is not true. This technique can be a great way to relieve even the most intense pain for a short amount of time.

Choose activities that fully hold your attention. Activities that use your hands can work well. Reading, movies, or hobbies may also help. Slow rhythmic breathing can be used as a distraction too. Ask your nurse about using fidget items while in the hospital.

Skin Stimulation

Skin stimulation uses touch to help relieve pain. Common methods include massage, pressure, heat, cold, and menthol products.

Massage

Massage works best when you use slow, steady, circular movements. Massage over or near the painful area using your hand. You may use lotion or oil if it feels good. You may massage yourself or ask someone to help. Light brushing may feel better than deep pressure for some people. Use what works best for you.

Avoid massage over radiation treatment areas.

Pressure

Pressure can be applied using your whole hand, fingertips, knuckles, or thumb. Apply firm pressure without causing pain. Hold pressure for up to one minute.

Relief may last from minutes to hours. You may also find tender trigger points near the pain that respond well to pressure.

Using Cold or Heat to Relieve Pain

Heat often helps sore muscles. Cold helps numb pain. Some people find cold works faster and lasts longer. Use whichever method feels best for you.

For cold, use gel packs or ice wrapped in a towel. Always keep a layer between the cold and your skin. Stop if you begin to shiver. Heat can be applied using gel packs, heating pads, warm towels, baths, or showers. For aching joints, light plastic wrap can help hold warmth.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 3/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#4448.

Menthol Products

Test a small area first. If no problem occurs, apply more as needed. The cooling feeling may last for hours. **Do not** apply heat over menthol products. This can cause burns.

Some menthol products contain aspirin-like ingredients. If you've been told to avoid aspirin products, check with your doctor first before using these products.

Safety Guidelines for Skin Stimulation

Heat and cold can damage skin if used incorrectly. Follow these safety steps.:

- Never use a heating pad on bare skin.
- Never sleep with a heating pad on.
- Use care if medicines make you drowsy.
- Use only 5 to 10 minutes at a time.
- **Do not** use on areas with poor feeling or blood flow.
- Stop cold use if you begin to shiver.
- **Do not** use heat on new injuries.
- **Do not** use heat over medicine patches.
- **Do not** apply menthol to broken skin or eyes.
- **Avoid** massage on red, swollen, or tender areas.
- Stop if cold use is too much that it causes pain..
- **Do not** use heat or cold on areas treated with radiation before checking with your doctor.

