

Pain Management

There are many causes and kinds of pain. Pain can be caused by injury, illness, sickness, disease, or surgery. You and your health care team work together to treat your pain. This Health Fact has some common questions and answers.

What questions should I ask my health care team?

- What pain medicine should I take?
- Can you explain the doses and times that the medicine can be taken?
- How often should I take the medicine? What should I do if I miss a dose?
- How long will I need to take the pain medicine?
- Can I take the pain medicine with food?
- Can I take the pain medicine with my other medicines?
- Should I avoid drinking alcohol while taking the pain medicine?
- What are the side effects of the pain medicine?
- What should I do if the medicine makes me sick to my stomach?
- What can I do if the pain medicine is not working?
- What else can I do to help treat my pain?

Talking About Pain

Why does my health care team need to ask about my pain?

This is because pain changes over time or your pain medicine may not be working. Your team should ask about your pain often.

What should I tell my health care team about my pain?

Tell them that you have pain, even if they don't ask. Your team may ask you to describe how bad your pain is on a scale of 0 (zero) to 10, with 10 being the worst pain. They may use other pain scales that use words. They may use scales with colors, faces, or pictures for children. Tell them where and when it hurts. Tell them if you can't sleep or do things like getting dressed or climbing stairs because of pain. The more they know about your pain the better they can treat it. The words below can be used to describe your pain.

- Aching
- Bloating
- Burning
- Cramping
- Comes and goes
- Constant
- Cutting
- Dull
- Numbing
- Pressing
- Pressure
- Pulling
- Radiating
- Searing
- Sharp
- Shooting
- Soreness
- Stabbing
- Throbbing
- Tightness

What if my pain gets worse?

Tell your health care team. Tell them how bad your pain is or if you're in pain most of the time. Tell them if your pain medicine is not helping.

Should I include pain medicine on my list of medicines or medication card?

Yes! Even pain medicine that you will take for a short time should be listed with all of your other medicines. List all of your pain medicines, those ordered by your team and those you buy over the counter on your own.

Managing Your Pain

How can I treat my pain?

There are many ways to manage your pain. There are medicines and other ways to treat pain without taking medicine. You and your health care team will find a plan that works for you.

What are some common pain medicines?

Some pain medicines are acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and opioids. Opioids include morphine, oxycodone, and hydromorphone. Many of these medicines come in pills, liquids, suppositories, and skin patches. Some pain may be treated with medicines that are not usually thought of as pain relievers. For example, antidepressants and anticonvulsants (medications that stop seizures).

What are the side effects of pain medicines?

It depends on the medicine. Side effects can include constipation, nausea, vomiting, itching, and sleepiness.

Constipation can be a major side effect of opioid pain medicines. It can include hard stools or not having a bowel movement more than every 2-3 days. Talk to your health care team about how to prevent or treat constipation. You should have a bowel movement every day or every other day.

What can I do if I have side effects or a bad reaction?

Call your doctor or nurse as soon as you can. Find out what can be done to treat the side effect. Ask if there is another pain medicine that may work better for you.

What if I'm afraid to take a pain medicine?

You may have had a bad side effect or bad reaction to a pain medicine in the past. Or you may be taking a lot of other medicines. Talk to your team about your concerns as there may be other pain management options.

Will I become addicted to pain medicine?

People may become addicted to pain medication if not used as prescribed. Addiction can happen when opioids are used for reasons other than pain control. These include reasons such as sleep, anxiety or because of the way it feels. If you have concerns about addiction, talk to your health care provider.

Will my pain medicine stop working if I take it for a long time?

This is called "tolerance." It means that after a while your body gets used to the medicine and you need to make a change to get pain relief. The condition causing your pain could also be getting worse or you may have a new type of pain. You may need more medicine or a different kind of medicine to control your pain. Tell your doctor or nurse about your concerns.

Can I crush pills if I can't swallow them?

Check with your health care team or pharmacist. Some medicines can be crushed, and some cannot. For example, time-release medicines should not be crushed. Ask your doctor or nurse if the medicine comes in a liquid or can be given another way.

Are there other ways to relieve pain?

Yes! Pain can be relieved in other ways without medication and in combination with your pain medication to help it make it more effective.

Other treatments for pain are:

- Acupuncture, which uses small needles to block pain.
- Taking your mind off the pain with movies, music, games, and conversation.
- Using distraction items such as fidget toys, spinners, stress balls and calming strips.
- Electrical nerve stimulation, which uses small burst of electricity to block or change your perception of pain.
- Heat or cold
- Physical therapy
- Exercise
- Hypnosis
- Massage
- Relaxation
- Meditation or mindfulness
- Aromatherapy
- Deep breathing
- Using comfort items such as a warm or weighted blanket or extra pillows.

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 © 5/2024. University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4922