

## OUCH! UNDERSTANDING PAIN & PAIN TREATMENT



Is there anything worse than living in constant pain? Maybe, but it's hard to imagine what it could be. And you shouldn't have to, not when there are so many pain relief options available. And yet, older adults often suffer from pain. Some studies indicate that between 50% and 60% of seniors live with pain. Among those in assisted living facilities, the number reaches nearly 80%.

Why? That's a good question, and there are a number of factors that contribute to this situation. Among them are:

- Some people wrongly assume that pain is a normal part of aging, so they don't tell their healthcare providers that they are in pain.
- Sometimes other health issues, such as dementia, make it difficult to communicate that they are in pain.
- Some fear that taking pain medications can lead to addiction.

### Treating Pain

One of the barriers to treating pain is the fact that it is harder to assess pain in older people accurately, and without a proper assessment it is difficult to determine the best way to treat the

pain. More importantly, even after the pain has been assessed, deciding which pain medication is best can be complicated. One of the difficulties is that our bodies change as we age, and some of those changes affect how our bodies metabolize drugs. For example, because our kidneys become smaller as we get older, blood flow in the kidneys is reduced, and this affects how our bodies process medicines. Additionally, some older people have kidney or liver problems, and this can rule out the use of certain medications.

Physical limitations can also affect our ability to take a medicine. For example, decreased saliva may make it difficult to swallow tablets and capsules, and reduced muscle mass can make injections more difficult. The risk of side effects is also higher in older adults.

Healthcare providers must take all of this into consideration when deciding on the best treatment for each patient.

### Treatment Options

The following are among the medications used to treat pain:



- **Acetaminophen**, available as a single ingredient or in combination with other medications, it comes in both prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) forms. If not used properly, it can cause liver damage.
- **Anesthetics** may be injected in or around a nerve to block the transmission of pain signals to the brain.
- **Anti-anxiety medications** help you relax and can relieve pain and help you sleep.
- **Anticonvulsants** can reduce some types of chronic pain.
- **Antidepressants** can treat nerve pain and other types of chronic pain.
- **Muscle relaxants** decrease muscle spasms, which decreases muscle pain.

- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** are a category of medications that includes ASA, ibuprofen, and naproxen. Available in both OTC and prescription strengths, these drugs decrease both pain and swelling. If not taken properly, they can cause stomach bleeding and kidney problems.
- **Opioids (narcotics)** are used to treat moderate to severe pain.
- **Steroids** decrease inflammation (swelling) that can cause pain.

In addition to medication, there are some other options that can relieve pain and enhance your quality of life.

- **Assistive devices**—such as canes, walkers, and crutches—can help you move more easily and help prevent falls.
- **Electrical stimulation devices** send a mild electrical pulse through your skin that interrupts the pain signal to the brain.
- **Heat** can reduce muscle spasms and pain.
- **Ice** helps decrease swelling and pain and may help prevent tissue damage.
- **Laser therapy, ultrasound, and radio waves** have been shown to be helpful in relieving pain.
- **Occupational therapy** can teach you new ways of doing common things to make daily activities easier.
- **Physical therapy** can improve strength and movement to decrease pain.
- **Surgery** to repair the underlying cause of the pain can be helpful when a specific cause is identified and other methods fail to provide relief.

### When Pain Isn't Treated

Chronic pain can take over your life and your thoughts and interfere with your relationships. Living with pain that isn't treated—or pain that isn't completely relieved by treatment—can lead to poor sleep, lack of appetite, anxiety, and reduced energy level. Unrelieved pain can also lead to depression. Studies have shown that nearly 45% of people between the ages of 85 and 89 and nearly 55% of those over 90 who have chronic pain also experience depression. If you are in pain, let your caregivers know.

### Taking Pain Medicines

When taken as directed, pain medications are safe and effective. However, if they are misused, they can be dangerous. It is important to take every dose exactly as prescribed—the right amount at the right time in the right way, every time. If you have any questions about your medications or how to take them, your consultant pharmacist will be happy to answer them for you.



### What about Medical Marijuana?

Some people may wonder if medical marijuana could be the answer to their pain. If you're thinking about it, here is what we know so far:

- There are cannabinoid prescription medications on the market now. Cannabinoids are the chemical components of marijuana.
- The safety and effectiveness of marijuana have not been tested under the strict standards that prescription medications must meet. Different active ingredients from marijuana have differing effects.
- Research has focused on just a few types of pain, including cancer, nerve pain associated with HIV, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, surgery, and trauma such as spinal cord injury.
- Evidence that marijuana will help in fibromyalgia, back pain, or arthritis is still pending.
- There are different ways medical marijuana can be taken. Most commonly, the dried leaves are either smoked or vaporized and inhaled or it is taken orally (either as a pill or a spray). However, it can also be mixed into foods and eaten, made into a tincture or tonic, or mixed into a cream that is applied to the skin.
- Smoking marijuana can lead to chronic cough and wheezing, and it may increase the risk for lung cancer.

More information about medical marijuana is available from Health Canada (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marijuana/about-apropos/faq-eng.php>).

