

ASCO ANSWERS

MANAGING PAIN

People with cancer commonly experience pain, which can make other symptoms or side effects of cancer seem worse. However, nearly all cancer pain can be treated successfully, with or without the use of medication.

WHAT CAUSES PAIN?

People with cancer may experience pain stemming from the cancer itself or from side effects of the cancer treatment. For example, a tumor may press on bones, nerves, the spinal cord, or organs, causing pain. In addition, pain may develop after surgery, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy. Pain often eventually diminishes, but some people may have persistent symptoms for months or years from permanent damage to the nerves. Meanwhile, some pain—such as arthritis, lower back pain, or migraine—may not be related to the cancer at all. However, it is still important to tell your doctor about this type of pain so that it can be addressed in the overall cancer treatment plan.



Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

WHAT ARE THE VARIOUS TYPES OF PAIN?

Chronic pain is not likely to improve on its own within a short time and without intervention; it includes pain from an injury that lasts longer than the expected healing time and pain associated with a chronic condition. In contrast, intermittent pain occurs from time to time and is usually related to a particular event or activity. Meanwhile, breakthrough pain occurs when pain worsens while a person is taking pain medication, lasting a few minutes or a few hours. Breakthrough pain may result from a specific incident or when the time for the next dose of a regularly scheduled medication is approaching, or it can occur without any evident cause.

WHAT DOES THE DOCTOR OR NURSE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MY PAIN?

You know your own pain best. The health care team's role in managing pain is to listen to your concerns and offer a solution. The doctor or nurse may ask you to explain the intensity of the pain using a scale from zero to 10 or offer words—such as burning, stabbing, or throbbing—that help you describe the pain. You should specify when and where your pain occurs and note whether anything makes the pain worse or relieves it. Some people find that keeping a pain journal helps track those factors.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR PAIN?

Doctors can treat pain by treating the source of the pain; changing the perception of pain, usually with pain-relieving medications; or interfering with pain signals sent to the brain through spinal treatments or nerve blocks. If medication is needed, non-opioid analgesics, such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen, are used for mild to moderate pain, while opioids, such as morphine, are used for moderate or severe pain. In addition, doctors may prescribe other medications—such as antidepressants and anticonvulsants—that may help relieve some types of pain, including neuropathic pain, which results from damaged or dysfunctional nerve fibers. Meanwhile, many people have found relief through other methods, including physical and occupational therapy; relaxation, distraction, hypnosis, and biofeedback; nutritional support; and acupuncture. A pain management plan may include a combination of methods.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- Based on my description of the pain, what do you think is causing it?
- Would you explain the options for managing my pain with medication?
- Which medication would you recommend?
- What are the side effects of the medication?
- How can I manage the side effects of the medication?
- How long will I get pain relief from a dose of the medication you are suggesting?
- How long will it take before I know how effective this medication regimen will be?
- What are other strategies for managing pain in place of or in addition to medication?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional information on pain and other side effects can be found at www.cancer.net/sideeffects.

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**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website,
www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.**

Cancer.Net™ 

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

TERMS TO KNOW

Acupuncture:

A complementary therapy inserting fine needles into specific points along the body to relieve pain or discomfort

Analgesic:

A medication or agent that relieves pain

Anesthetic:

An agent that causes total or partial loss of physical sensation

Biofeedback:

A method in which people use their minds to control a response from their body, such as heart rate

Intravenous (IV) medication:

Medication injected into a vein

Nerve block:

Injection of a medication directly into the nerve or spine for pain control

Neuropathic pain:

Burning, shooting, or numbing pain from nerve damage

Opioid:

A medication that requires a prescription and provides strong pain relief

Oral medication:

A medication taken by mouth

Pain threshold:

The point at which pain is noticeable

Pain tolerance level:

The peak amount of pain that a person can endure

Rescue medicine:

A medication used to control breakthrough pain