

Cancer pain management

This handout provides information for patients about dealing with the pain associated with cancer.

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Talk to your doctor

- It is always important to tell your doctor or nurse if you are experiencing pain. Treating it early can prevent problems down the track.

Keep a note of your pain levels

- It is helpful to keep track of how much pain you are experiencing. You can use a pain diary (see below), which shows the day and time, your pain score (0 to 10, where 0 is no pain and 10 is the worst pain imaginable), the pain relief medication and dose you used and the response achieved after one hour.

Example of a pain diary					
Day	Time	Pain level (0 to 10)	Drug and dose taken for pain relief	Pain level one hour after taking drug (0 to 10)	Comments
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					

Don't suffer in silence

- Relief of pain is important and there is no benefit to suffering with pain.
- Pain can usually be well controlled with medications taken by mouth.
- If oral medications do not work, many other options are available.



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- Using a script may help you communicate with your doctor about your pain, such as:
‘Hello, Dr____, this is____. I’m calling to talk with you about the pain I’m having. Over the past week, my pain has been____on a 0 to 10 rating scale. The pain has been so severe that I have not been able to sleep, do my usual activities, or visit with my friends. I’ve been taking my pain medicine as you prescribed it. I’ve also been taking ____ additional doses of medicine every day. The medicine isn’t working. Can we change the pain medicine so I can get better pain control?’¹

Don’t be afraid to try an opioid

- Opioids such as morphine are often used to relieve pain.
- When opioids are used to treat cancer pain, addiction is rarely a problem.
- They are controlled substances that need to be properly safe guarded in the home.
- They must be used with caution and should not be mixed with alcohol or illicit substances.
- If you take opioids now, they will still work later.
- You need to take laxatives to prevent constipation when using these medications.

Keep the lines of communication open

- Communication with doctors and nurses is critical.
- Doctors and nurses cannot tell how much pain you have unless you let them know.
- Doctors and nurses want to know about any problems that you think the pain medications may be causing, because there are probably ways to make these better.
- Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any difficulties getting the medications or concerns about taking them. They have dealt with such issues before and will help you.
- Expect optimal treatment of pain and side effects.

Ask your doctor for all the necessary information

Make sure you get the following from your doctor:²

- a list of each medication prescribed, a description of what each medication is for and instructions of how and when to take each one
- a list of potential side effects of each medication and what to do if these occur
- a list of all medications to be discontinued
- a list of telephone numbers of various health care professionals and specific instructions of who to call if the following occur:
 - any problems in getting the prescription or taking the medication
 - new pain, change in pain or pain not relieved by the medication
 - nausea and vomiting that prevents eating for one day
 - no bowel movements for three days
 - difficulty awaking from sleep easily during the daytime
 - confusion
- a plan for follow-up visits and/or the telephone calls.

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References

1. Miaskowski C, Dodd M, West C, et al. Randomized clinical trial of the effectiveness of a self-care intervention to improve cancer pain management. *J Clin Oncol* 2004; 22: 1713-1720.
2. National Comprehensive Cancer Network. NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology. Available online at: http://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/PDF/pain.pdf (accessed January 2010).

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