

## Senior Health: How to Manage Pain



Pain is one of the most common complaints among seniors.

Like many seniors, you may not want to admit you have pain. But the fact is that there are lots of treatments that can help with your pain.

Tell your doctor when you are in pain. Describe it in as much detail as you can. The more your doctor knows about your pain, the more he or she can help you manage it.

### Using pain medicines safely

#### Over-the-counter medicines

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is often the first choice for treating mild to moderate pain in seniors. It works as well as anti-inflammatory drugs in most cases. But it should be used with caution in people who have liver problems.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as aspirin (Bayer, Bufferin), ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), and naproxen (Aleve), are not as safe for seniors as acetaminophen is. NSAIDs have side effects that include upset stomach, heartburn, nausea, constipation, and dizziness. People who are

older than 65 are more likely to have serious side effects, like intestinal bleeding or upset stomach. NSAIDs also may cause high blood pressure and have been linked to heart disease.

If you have kidney problems or if you are older than 65, talk to your doctor before you take any anti-inflammatory drug.

#### Opiate pain relievers

These are strong medicines that must be prescribed by your doctor. Opiates (also called opioids or narcotics) include hydromorphone, morphine, and oxycodone. They often come in a mixture with aspirin or acetaminophen to treat moderate to severe pain.

Seniors may be more likely to feel the side effects of opiates, including constipation, nausea, and sleepiness. They may need lower-than-normal doses of medicine.

You may be afraid of becoming addicted to this type of medicine. But addiction to opiates is rare when the drugs are used for pain under a doctor's care.

#### Drug interaction

Drug interaction is the way different medicines react to each other when you take them together. This interaction can sometimes cause serious problems. Some drugs cause more problems than others and may increase your risk for falling.

You may already be taking one or more drugs to treat other problems, such as diabetes, arthritis, high cholesterol, heart disease, or high blood pressure. Be sure your doctor knows all the drugs you are taking, including herbs, vitamins, and over-the-counter medicines.

## How can you manage pain at home?

To manage your pain at home, it may help to:

- Pace yourself. Break up large jobs into smaller tasks. Save harder tasks for days when you have less pain, or go back and forth between hard tasks and easier ones. Take rest breaks.
- Keep moving. Gentle, daily exercise can help reduce pain over the long run.
- Try heat, cold packs, and massage.
- Get enough sleep. Talk with your doctor if you have trouble sleeping.
- Cut down on caffeine in sodas, coffee, tea, and chocolate.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Think positive. Your thoughts can affect your pain level. Do things that you enjoy to distract yourself when you have pain instead of focusing on the pain.

## Other options

### Medicines

If pain relievers do not help, there are other medicines that may help you. These include medicines usually used for depression or seizures, corticosteroids, a lidocaine patch, and pain relievers you put directly on skin.

### Complementary therapies

For some people, complementary therapies can help with pain. These include:

- Acupuncture.
- Biofeedback.
- Chiropractic therapy.
- Guided imagery or meditation.
- Hydrotherapy or magnet therapy.
- Hypnosis.
- Massage.
- Yoga.

## When to call a doctor

- Your pain gets worse or is out of control.
- You have trouble sleeping.
- You feel down or "blue," or you do not enjoy things like you once did.
- You are very worried or anxious about your pain.
- You have trouble taking your pain medicine.
- You have any concerns about your pain medicine.
- You have trouble with constipation.
- You do not get better as expected.
- You have any new symptoms.