

Pain or Physical Discomfort

For many people, one of the scariest parts of cancer may be fear of experiencing pain. And yet, pain can be treated and managed in a way that is very tolerable. Admitting that you are in pain is not a sign of weakness. In order to better manage pain and discomfort, it is helpful to know how to communicate about pain and how to effectively take control of pain and discomfort. Please talk to your health care team about any pain or discomfort you are experiencing.

What Causes Pain in People with Cancer?

Tumors can cause pain when they press on a nerve, invade bones, or press on a body organ. Medical tests for cancer or the treatment for cancer such as surgery might also cause pain and discomfort but generally this type of pain is very short-term and can be treated well with pain medicines. Pain or discomfort as a result of longer-term side effects from cancer and its treatment may require more careful pain management over time. If you have more challenging issues related to managing pain, there are doctors who specialize in pain management that can work with you. The good news is: no matter what is causing pain or discomfort, you can work closely with your health care team to find a good treatment plan.

How Should You Describe Your Pain?

You will find that your health care team will ask you on a regular basis to describe and rate your pain. By talking about pain, you begin the process of controlling it. In between appointments, recording details about your pain and other symptoms in a notebook or journal can be very helpful. Some of the important characteristics of your pain to discuss with your doctor are:

- Severity: How bad is the pain on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being “no pain” and 10 being “the worst pain you can imagine?”
- Location: Where is the pain? Is it in more than one place?
- Frequency and Duration: When do you have pain? Is the pain always there or does it come and go? How long does it last? Is it better or worse at different times of the day or night?
- Quality: Describe the pain. Is it burning or stabbing? Sharp or dull? Cramping?
- Change: What makes it better (medication, a heating pad) or worse (moving, coughing)?

Helpful Tips for Controlling Pain

- Be honest with your health care team about your pain. They want to help you manage your pain.
- Note how much medication you are taking and the time you take it.
- Make sure you are taking medications to prevent constipation if you are taking pain medication.
- Do NOT wait until the pain is unbearable to take your pain medication. It is easier to prevent pain, or relieve it when it starts, than it is to treat pain once it becomes severe.

Use of Pain Medications

Some people with cancer are fearful of getting addicted to pain medicines, or worry that pain medicines won't work later if they use them early on. These are both myths. The right amount of pain medicine is the amount that controls most or all of the pain, most or all of the time.

This information is provided as an educational service only. It is not meant to take the place of medical care or the advice of your doctor.