

Help with Pain

Internet version of this handout with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/pain>

Many patients and survivors experience pain during and after cancer treatment. Pain and the associated thoughts and emotions can impact quality of life. It may help to know that cancer-related pain can be treated successfully for most patients. *Relieving side effects is an important part of cancer care and treatment. This is called symptom management or palliative care. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you experience and any change in symptoms.*

Causes of Pain

- **The cancer.** When cancer grows in an organ, such as the liver, it may stretch part of the organ causing pain. If a cancer grows and spreads to the bones or other organs, it can put pressure on nerves causing pain.
- **Surgery.** It is normal to experience pain from cancer surgery. Most pain goes away in days to weeks, occasionally it may last for months. This long-lasting pain can be from permanent damage to the nerves and the development of scar tissue.
- **Radiation therapy.** Pain may develop after radiation therapy and go away on its own. It can also develop months or years after radiation therapy to some parts of the body, such as the chest, breast, or spinal cord.
- **Chemotherapy.** Some chemotherapy can cause pain and numbness in the fingers and toes, called peripheral neuropathy. Usually this pain goes away when treatment is finished. But sometimes the damage is permanent.
- **Other causes.** People with cancer can still have pain from other causes not related to the cancer. These include migraines, arthritis, or muscle strain. The treatment plan your health care team develops with you should include these kinds of pain. Any pain decreases your quality of life.

Diagnosing pain

You know your pain best. It is important to discuss any new symptoms or a change in symptoms with your doctor or a pain specialist. They may order certain tests like x-rays or other scans, and can help you find a medication or other pain relief method that works for you.

Keep a diary of your pain. Things to include are:

- When did the pain start? What were you doing when you had pain?
- What does the pain feel like? Is it “knifelike,” “stabbing,” “dull,” “aching” or “cramping”?
- Where is the pain? Can you point to it with your finger, or is it spread all over?
- How bad is your pain most of the time? How severe is the pain when you do certain activities? Can you rate the pain, on a 1-10 scale, with the number “10” being the worst pain imaginable? Or can you rate it as mild, moderate or severe pain?
- How long did the pain last?
- Does the pain come and go whenever you perform a certain activity, or is it unpredictable?
- What can you do to reduce the pain or make it go away? What have you tried before that has worked?
- How is your mood? Are you depressed or anxious? Does this make the pain worse?

Managing and treating pain

There are many ways to manage and treat cancer-related pain, including non-opioid medications and non-medication methods. Non-medication methods include things like acupuncture, physical therapy, and psychotherapy. Talk with your doctor to find the best treatment for your pain.

Opioid medications are sometimes prescribed for managing cancer pain and can be very effective. Some people worry that they will become dependent on opioid medications, but close monitoring significantly reduces this risk. Managing pain effectively is a very important part of your cancer care.

Be sure you understand how your prescribed pain medication works (is it fast or long acting) and exactly how and when to take it. For example, “with food” or “before going to bed”. Discuss potential or experienced side effects with your doctor as they can often be managed.

Should you need to go to the emergency department (ED), **always** take your pain medication with you. Waits can be long, ED may not be able to give you what you need for your pain in a timely fashion.

Adapted from: <https://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/pain> <https://chemocare.com/chemotherapy/side-effects/pain-and-chemotherapy.aspx>

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Cancer Society, Cancer Pain](#)
- [NIH, Cancer Pain \(PDQ®\)](#)
- [NIH, Pain](#)
- [Livestrong, Pain Management](#)
- [ASCO Answers, Managing Pain](#)
- [Chemocare, Pain & Chemotherapy](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Side Effects, Pain](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Treating Pain with Medication](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Talking With Your Doctor About Pain Management](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Managing Cancer Pain](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Medical Marijuana and Cancer](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Opening the Door Effective Pain Management](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Pain and Symptom Management](#)

Información Española

- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Efectos secundarios](#)
- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Dolor](#)
- [Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Control del dolor](#)