

Pain



Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects of caregiving is not knowing what to do when the person you are caring for is experiencing pain.

You may have many questions about managing pain, such as:

- How do you know they are in pain?
- How severe is the pain?
- What type of pain is it and what can you do to manage it?

This chapter may help you answer these questions. By applying, and adapting the strategies in this chapter, you can help the person you care for manage their pain. Managing pain may support well-being.

Pain is typically defined as suffering or discomfort as a result of something going on inside the body (e.g. illness or injury). No matter how it is defined, it is important to remember that pain is what the person says it is. To care for someone else in pain, it is best to work with them to understand the pain from their point of view.

Did you know?

- Pain is one of the most frequent causes of visits to the emergency department.
- Pain can impact a person's quality of life, including:
 - Poor quality of sleep
 - Less movement
 - Depressed mood
 - Being withdrawn from others
 - Poor quality of life

However, these concerns can be addressed if pain is improved.

- Pain can be treated with or without medications, and sometimes treatment can alternate between these approaches.
- Proper treatment of pain starts with a full assessment.

The information in this chapter is not intended to replace the advice of a health care professional. Please consult a health care professional for advice about specific medical conditions. Look for our *helpful tips on communicating effectively with health care professionals*.

Recognizing Pain

How do I know the person I am caring for is in pain?

Pain can be experienced and expressed differently by each person. Some people are able to talk about their pain and show you where the discomfort is. Other people may only show a change in their body language, appetite, or mood. Depending on how well you know the person you are caring for, you may or may not be able to easily recognize changes in them. Regardless of how well you know the person, you can recognize pain if you ask a few key questions and look for key signs.

Ask specific questions.

The following are examples of questions that you can ask to find out if the person you are caring for is in pain:

- Are you feeling any aching/soreness right now?
- Does it hurt anywhere?
- Are you having any discomfort?
- Have you taken any medications/remedies to help ease your pain or discomfort?
- Are you losing sleep due to aches/pains/discomfort?
- Are you having trouble with your day-to-day routine because of pain? (showing, cooking, housework, pet care, hobbies and interests, etc.)

Myths about Pain

X *Pain is part of the natural process of aging.*

While pain is a common experience for seniors, it should not be considered part of the natural process of aging.

X *If I take pain medication I will become an addict.*

It is a commonly held misbelief that taking pain medication will lead to addiction. It is important to understand the difference between becoming tolerant, dependent and addicted to pain medications. ([See About Medication](#))



Look for indicators and take notes.

As a family member or friend caregiver, you will be able to observe small changes in the person you are caring for better than most health care professionals. Never underestimate the knowledge you have of the person you are caring for. You know them best.

If you notice any of the following, it could mean that the person you are caring for is in pain:

- There is a change in their eating habits.
- Their interest in going out or being with others changes.
- They tell you they are uncomfortable, or are crying or upset about discomfort.
- They display a facial expression of distress when they move.
- They stay in bed for longer than usual.
- They tell you they are having trouble sleeping.
- They avoid their usual movements (e.g. getting up and about, getting dressed, going outside).

*"I never knew
there were
different types
of pain!"*

– A caregiver from
Peterborough, ON

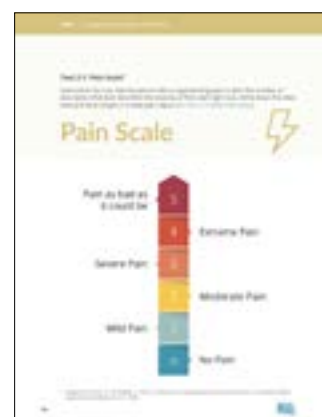
Determine the Severity of the Pain

How intense is the pain?

If the person you are caring for tells you that they are in pain, the next step is to identify the severity of pain to help you determine what kind of support they might need.

Here are some examples about how to ask this question:

- Does your pain feel mild, moderate, or severe?
- Do you have a little, medium, or a lot of pain?
- On a scale of 0 – 5, with 0 being no pain and 5 being the worst pain you could ever imagine, how would you rate your pain?
- Try using the Pain Scale with the person you care for ([See Tool 2.1: Pain Scale](#)).



Identify the Type of Pain

What type of pain is the person I am caring for experiencing?

When you learn the terms that describe the types and sources of pain, it will be easier for you to:

- Understand a person's pain.
- Provide ideas for their comfort.
- Help them communicate with a health care professional.

Pain Term ⁷	Description
New (acute)	An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience that is associated with injury or obvious disease process, usually short in duration (i.e., one week to 10 days).
Long-term (chronic)	Prolonged pain that lasts at least three months beyond the time of new injury or obvious disease process. Other terms often used with chronic pain include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'intractable' (does not go away with ordinary treatment), or • "refractory" (unable to manage with traditional treatments).
Referred	Sometimes, pain can be felt in another part of the body. An example of this would be when someone feels arm pain with a heart attack. Referred pain can occur with acute and chronic pain.
Neuropathic	Pain that is primarily caused by a problem in the nervous system rather than obvious injury. Some examples may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Burning' or 'tingling' or numbness. • Shooting pains. • "Pins and needles". • Typically feels worse at night. • Pain felt from something that does not usually cause pain. An example of this is when a person feels pain on their feet with bed sheets on them or pain with clothing touching the skin. Another term for this is allodynia.
Breakthrough	For chronic pain, treatment may require using a long-acting pain medication for constant pain management. Sometimes, even though a person is taking pain medication, their pain still 'breaks through' and they require another pain remedy to help ease the pain.

⁷ RGP of Toronto. (2018). SF7 toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.rgptoronto.ca/resources>



Strategies to Manage Pain

What can you do to help someone with pain, right now?

If the person you are caring for is experiencing pain right now, consider the following tips. Remember, the person you are caring for knows their pain the best and may have their own ideas.

Provide medications as prescribed.

- Taking pain medication regularly can help prevent pain from getting out of control. Do not wait for the pain to be at its most intense.

Apply heat to relax muscles.

- Encourage the person you care for to try a warm shower or bath, a heated cloth or water bottle, or a heated blanket. Prevent burns by setting the heated blanket on low to medium and check with your doctor or nurse practitioner about how long to apply heat.

Apply cold to help with inflammation.

- Pain that comes from swelling can be soothed by a cold cloth for 20 minutes at a time. Applying cold to the skin for too long can cause damage to the skin so check with your doctor or nurse practitioner about how long to apply cold.

Provide cushioning.

- Use pillows or blankets. Position the person you care for to find a comfortable position that works for them. Make sure the person has lots of different pillow shapes and sizes to choose from so that they can position themselves if needed.

Focus on relaxation.

- Ask the person you care for to focus on their breathing (i.e. inhaling and exhaling). The library, internet or bookstore can offer different resources for guided meditations for pain management. (See Tool 2.2: Guided Meditation).

Try distraction.

- Try to encourage the person you care for to participate in an enjoyable activity to distract from the pain. Suggest physical activity like a short walk outdoors, or a social gathering, drawing, painting, reading, watching a movie, or music.

Consider alternative approaches to pain management that focus on body or mind.

- Alternative approaches that focus on the mind include distraction, meditation, cognitive behavioural therapy, and relaxation.
- Alternative approaches that focus on the body can include acupuncture, massage, physiotherapy, and more.
- For answers to questions about alternative approaches to pain management, ask a health care professional.

About Pain Medication and Addiction

How can you tell if the person you are caring for is addicted to pain medication?

It is a commonly held misbelief that taking pain medication will lead to addiction. While it is important to be aware of all medications being taken, why they are being taken, and their potential side effects, it is also important to understand the difference between becoming tolerant, dependent, and addicted to pain medications.

- **Tolerance** occurs when a person has been on the same medication for a long period of time and requires an increase in the amount taken for the medication to work to decrease pain. This is a very common experience for people who have been taking pain medication for a long time and should not be mistaken for addiction.
- **Dependence** occurs when a person experiences discomfort or physical effects (sweating, nausea, etc.) if they are taken off pain medication too quickly.
- **Addiction** occurs when a person takes a pain medication (e.g. an opioid) to feel something other than pain relief. Examples could include taking pain medication to feel “happy” or “numb”.
- If taken as prescribed, pain medication very rarely causes a person to become addicted.
- It is important to manage pain in order to support day-to-day function. If you or the person you are caring for have questions about pain medication, it is recommended that you ask a health care professional as soon as possible, in order to avoid delaying pain



What can you do to help someone manage pain on an ongoing basis?

Finding ways to help the person you care for is not always straightforward. Sometimes you have to try a few different strategies before you get it right. It is well worth the effort to keep trying. Managing pain can dramatically improve a person's quality of life.

Consider the following when helping someone manage their pain:

Monitor the pain and take notes.

- Note the date, time, severity, attempts to ease pain, any medicine taken, etc. (See Tool 2.3: Daily Pain Diary).
- Note what soothes the pain and what makes it worse.

Seek professional assessment.

- All new and/or severe pain should be assessed by a doctor or nurse practitioner as soon as possible.
- Encourage the person you are caring for to make an appointment or ask if you can make one for them. Let them know that they should not wait.
- Remember – assessment can lead to treatment!

Talk about pain.

- Pain management sometimes involves talking about it with the person who is experiencing pain.
- Find out what treatment means to the person you are caring for.
- Ask them how much pain they are comfortable living with.
- Keep them involved and in control of their pain management.

Clarify misunderstandings about pain.

- Misunderstandings can lead to pain that is not treated.
- Listen for comments like:
 - "I don't want to take pain medications because I might get addicted."
 - "If I ignore the pain, it will go away on its own."
 - "I'm old, what should I expect?"

Include as many strategies that will help.

- Pain management should include both medication and non-medication strategies.
- Some people may express a desire to use cannabis and/or cannabidiol (CBD) to manage their pain. The person you care for can ask a qualified health care professional if this method of pain relief is appropriate for them. To learn more about using cannabis for pain management, please visit the Government of Canada website at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis.html>.
- See above for alternative approaches to pain management.

Don't lose hope.

- Pain is different for everyone, and it impacts each person's life differently.
- Supporting someone who is in pain may take a few tries to get the right approach. You may not always get it right on the first try. This does not mean you are wrong or that you should give up.
- Follow up by letting your health care professional know what is or is not working.

Helpful Tips to Communicate with Health Care Professionals

A challenge faced by caregivers is how to communicate with health care professionals about the pain experienced by the person you are caring for. It's important to be prepared to speak with health care professionals so that they can provide help by offering prescriptions, strategies to try, referrals to other specialists, or other forms of assistance.

The following are some helpful tips on how to communicate with health care professionals:

Offer detail.

- The more detail you can provide about the pain, the more a health care professional can help.
- Share a daily pain diary with a health care professional during an appointment ([See Tool 2.3: Daily Pain Diary](#)).
- Be prepared to answer questions about the pain, such as: when, where, how long, how much, what have you tried, what makes it worse, what makes it better, etc.
- Beyond explaining who you are and the relationship you have with the person, offer details about your caregiving role, the support you provide, and how you and the person you care for would like you to be involved in care.



Ask questions.

- What supports are available in the community? Health care professionals should have knowledge about geriatric teams, pain clinics, and community programs that can support pain management in your area. They will be able to tell you and the person you care for about these services and if they think a referral is needed.
- Ask about alternatives to pain medication. The health care professional may have recommendations for alternative types of therapy or treatments to manage pain. See above [alternative approaches to pain management](#).

Finding Additional Support

How do you find additional supports related to pain?

- **Ask a health care professional.** Ask a qualified professional who can point you in the right direction. They will be able to direct you to the nearest pain specialist and provide a referral if needed.
- **Look online.** You can search for pain specialists or clinics by going online and browsing the Healthline, health services for Ontario website. To access the website go to: www.thehealthline.ca/.

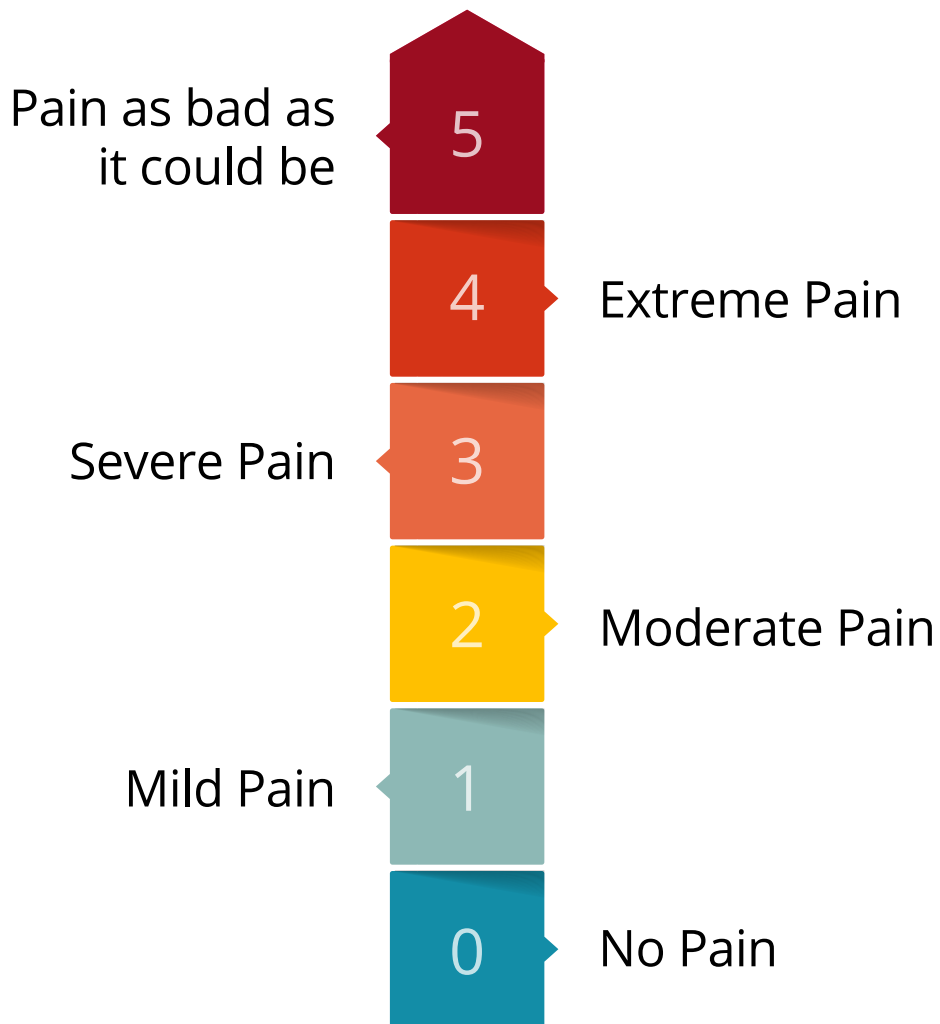
Summary

This chapter has provided you with some language and strategies related to pain management. This chapter has also provided tips to help you communicate with health care professionals. Now you can start to develop strategies with the person you care for to manage pain and find the right supports.

Tool 2.1: Pain Scale⁸

Instructions for use: Ask the person who is experiencing pain to pick the number or description that best describes the severity of their pain right now. Write down the date, time and level of pain in a daily pain diary (See Tool 2.3: Daily Pain Diary).

Pain Scale



⁸ Adapted from Herr, K., and Mobily, P. (1993). *Comparison of selected pain assessment tools for use with the elderly. Applied Nursing Research*, 6(1), 39-46.



Tool 2.2: Guided Meditation

There are many guided meditation apps, podcasts, and online videos available, some of them are free and others paid, such as:

Headspace: www.headspace.com.

Insight Timer: www.insighttimer.com.

Calm: www.calm.com.

10% Happier: www.tenpercent.com/podcast.


Stop, Breathe & Think: www.stopbreathethink.com/.

Guided Meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihO02wUzgkc>.

Tool 2.3: Daily Pain Diary

Keeping a daily pain diary may help you and your health care professional find out what makes the pain better or worse. Complete the diary below every day for several days in a row to look for patterns or trends. Do this with the person you are caring for or encourage them to complete it on their own. Over time, it may be clear what strategies are working better than others.

Pain Caregiving Strategies Handbook								
Daily Pain Diary								
		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Date	Sept. 17th							
Time of Day	8am							
Pain Scale Number	4							
Name of Pain Medication	Medication 1							
	Medication 2							
Amount of Medication Taken (Dose)	x.xx milligrams							
	x.xx milligrams							
Pain scale number 30 minutes after taking the medication	2							
What made the pain better today?	Taking my pain medication Applying heat							
What made the pain worse today?	Sitting for too long							

www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies 

Daily Pain Diary Template⁹

⁹ Adapted from HealthlinkBC. (2018). *Pain Diary*. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/abg7017>



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Regional Geriatric Programs of Ontario. (2019). Caregiving Strategies Handbook: Providing Care and Support for a Senior Living with Frailty. Retrieved from www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies

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