

Managing Your Pain at Home

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INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILIES



WHY PAIN MANAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT

Managing your pain makes you feel more comfortable, but it does a lot more than that. Good pain management allows both your mind and body to focus on healing, and healing faster can help prevent complications. As you and your healthcare providers manage your pain, expect that:

- **You'll feel less stress.** Feeling comfortable reduces the stress that comes with pain. Less stress means your mind and body can both work harder on healing.
- **You'll be able to move around more easily.** If you feel less pain, you can start to do therapy exercises (such as walking or breathing exercises) that will get your strength back more quickly.
- **You may have fewer complications.** People whose pain is well controlled seem to do better after a medical procedure. They have fewer problems like pneumonia and blood clots because they are able to do therapy exercises.

When you get home after a procedure, you may still be feeling some pain. The pain is usually worst in the first few days. After that, it should begin to improve.

The goal of pain management is to reduce your pain enough so you can rest and can do the activities that will help you recover. Successful pain management does not always mean taking away 100 percent of your pain.



Your pain management goal

Before going home, ask your healthcare providers to help you set a pain management goal. To help make the best plan, you need to consider three factors:

- **What recovery activities do you need to do?** These may include coughing or breathing deeply, walking, or doing physical therapy exercises. They may also include self-care activities, like getting dressed or feeding yourself.
- **How much pain would still allow you to do these activities?** Everyone's ability to tolerate pain is different. Talk with your healthcare providers about your history with pain and your previous responses to pain medications. They'll help you identify the level of pain you could manage and still do your recovery activities.
- **What would be comforting to you?** When you're uncomfortable, your pain can feel even worse. Think about what you need to be comfortable. This might include managing constipation or nausea, staying warm, sleeping without interruption, or reading.

Once you've identified these things, you and your healthcare providers can determine your best plan for pain management. If the plan isn't working, or if you are unable to do your recovery activities, ask your healthcare providers for advice. Also, be sure you discuss any other medications you're taking with your healthcare provider.

Pain relief medication

You may go home with one of the pain treatments below. Whatever your pain medication, **take it as directed**. If your pain improves after the first few days, you may be able to wait longer between doses.

- **Prescription or non-prescription pain pills.** Some patients suffer needlessly from pain because they're afraid they might become addicted to certain pain medications. When taken as directed, there's very little risk of addiction. Once you've taken a pill, it usually takes about 30 to 40 minutes to feel relief.
- **More than one kind of medication.** Pain medication, anti-inflammatory medication, and muscle relaxants all control pain in different ways. You may need to take them at different times. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions carefully.
- **LAID (local anesthetic infusion device).** This is a **pain pump** set up by your healthcare provider to deliver numbing medication for a short time. Don't put an ice pack over it. Your healthcare provider will tell you how to care for it and when to remove it.

Pain relief without medication

In addition to medication, there are other ways to help manage pain. These don't replace your medication, but they can help you feel better.

Relax. Find a comfortable position in a quiet place. Breathe in slowly and deeply. Then slowly breathe all the way out. Count slowly as you breathe and try to focus on breathing rhythmically. Do this for up to 20 minutes.

Use a cold pack, after checking with your provider.

- A cold pack can include anything frozen or cold that's sealed in a bag and won't get you wet. Cover it with a towel so it won't freeze your skin.
- Don't use it over areas of poor circulation. Don't use it if it makes the pain worse.
- Use it for any length of time if it remains comfortable and doesn't irritate your skin.

Elevate your limb. If you had surgery on your arm or leg, prop the arm or leg up above the level of your heart.

Distract yourself. Thinking about something else can help. This might include watching TV, listening to music, playing a game, reading, or visiting with a friend.

Talking with your healthcare providers

If your pain worsens, call your healthcare providers. They may need to increase or change your medication. When you call, they'll want to know how much pain you're feeling. They'll also ask you to describe the pain. Here are some ways you might describe it:

- Where does it hurt? *It hurts in my shoulder, hip, knee, etc.*
- When does it hurt? *It comes and goes, or, it hurts all the time.*
- What does it feel like? *It feels sharp, dull, aching, throbbing, like pins and needles, like burning, etc.*
- How intense is it? *It is mild, moderate, severe.*
- What makes it feel worse? *It feels worse when I stand, sit, lie down, walk, sleep, eat, read, get dressed, etc.*



WHEN SHOULD I CALL MY HEALTHCARE PROVIDER?

If you experience any of the following, contact your healthcare provider right away:

- Excessive sleepiness (hard to wake up)
- Increase in pain, or pain that you can't tolerate
- Numbness, tingling, or weakness where you don't expect it
- Nausea or vomiting
- Constipation
- Itching
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, or fainting
- Fever
- Skin rash
- A ringing, buzzing, or whistling sound in your ears
- A metallic taste in your mouth, or numbness or tingling around your mouth and lips
- Coolness, tightness, or pain around your incisions
- Blurred vision
- Redness, swelling, or drainage around a catheter

Go to the emergency room right away if you have **chest pain** or **shortness of breath**.