

# Cancer Pain

# Effects of Cancer and Treatment: Cancer Pain

Many people who develop cancer worry about being in pain. However, not all people with cancer experience pain. For those who do, there have been many improvements in preventing and managing pain. If you have pain, your cancer health care team will help you manage it.

## How will my cancer health care team treat my pain?

Pain caused by cancer may be the result of the cancer itself or your treatment. The reason for the pain may be the tumour pressing or irritating bones, nerves, tissue and organs. Cancer treatments, such as radiation, can also cause pain. This is usually an irritation or burning feeling of the skin. Side effects of systemic treatment, such as chemotherapy, can cause a sore mouth. People also have pain, while they are healing, after surgery.

Depending on the cause of the pain, it may stop when your treatment ends or it may last for a longer time. To find the cause of your pain, the cancer team will ask you questions about your pain. They will then make a plan to prevent and manage it. Experts in pain management from the palliative care team may be asked to review your condition. Palliative care is a type of medical care that focuses on treatment of symptoms for people who are living with a long-standing illness, like cancer.

Just as the causes of pain are different, the types of pain relief are also different. Radiation, chemotherapy or surgeries are used to relieve pain but cancer pain is also treated with medicine (painkillers). The chart below divides pain and treatment into different groups.

**What are your questions? Please ask.**

**We are here to help you.**

Types of Pain	Medicine
Mild-to-moderate pain	Ask your cancer doctor before taking pain medication that is bought over-the-counter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®)</li> <li>• Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicine (such as naproxen - Aleve® or ibuprofen - Advil®)</li> </ul>
Moderate-to-severe pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opiodes (such as codeine - in Tylenol No3®, morphine in - MS Contin®, hydromorphone - in Dilaudid®, or fentanyl).</li> </ul>
Tingling and burning pain or pain caused by swelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nerve pain agents (such as amitroptiline - Elavil®) or gabapentin</li> <li>• Steroids (such as prednisone or dexamethasone)</li> </ul>

Some people are on two or three different medicines because they work in different ways to stop the pain.

### Can I get addicted to pain medicines?

Some people are worried about going on strong pain medicines because they have heard that painkillers can cause you to become addicted (“hooked on drugs”). A mental dependence happens when there becomes a craving for the medication and is more than just physical need. It is rare to become addicted while taking pain medications for cancer treatment.

In cancer care people are taking pain medicines because they have pain, not because they want to get high.

If you need pain medicines, your cancer doctor:

- will start you on a small dose and only increase it until you are comfortable, and
- will not give you more drug than you need.

Take the drug(s) as directed by your cancer health care team. If you have more or new pain, contact your cancer doctor or nurse. They will review what is happening with you and make a plan with you to manage the pain.

## **How can I deal with pain?**

- Tell your doctor or nurse right away about any pain you feel. Do not wait for the doctor or nurse to ask you about pain.
- If your doctor prescribes pain medicine for you, take it as directed.
- Keep a record of your pain. Write it down.
  - › What type of pain is it (tingling, burning, throbbing, sharp, all the time or comes and goes)?
  - › Where does it hurt?
  - › Does the pain move to other parts of your body?
  - › When did the pain start?
  - › How bad does the pain feel? Use a scale of 0-10, 0 being no pain and 10 being the worst pain ever. What number is it when you have the least pain in the day and what number is it when you have the worst pain?
  - › What makes the pain worse? What helps relieve the pain?
  - › What is the pain preventing you from doing?
  - › What worries you about the pain?
  - › When did you take your pain medicine and did it work?
- Stress, worrying and being anxious can sometimes make the pain worse. When you feel worried, anxious or upset try taking a deep breath through your nose and blow out slowly. Do this several times.
- Some people find that yoga or other forms of exercise help. Others find that meditation, mindfulness, relaxation, imagery, therapeutic touch or massages are helpful.

## **What are the side effects of pain medication?**

Some people do not have any side effects to pain medications. Other people may have a few or many side effects. Often, strong painkillers are constipating (not being able to move your bowels) and many people have to take laxatives to increase bowel movements or loosen the stool.

These strong painkillers can make people sleepy and /or sick to their stomach. For most people, both these side effect go away after a few days. Your health care team will give you more details about the side effects that you might have and how to cope with them.

**Patient and family feedback is very important to us.**

**We would like to invite you to send any comments or suggestions on how to improve this booklet to [education.cancercare@nshealth.ca](mailto:education.cancercare@nshealth.ca) or feel free to call us at 1-866-599-2267.**

*Prepared by: Nova Scotia Health Cancer Care Program  
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*It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider.*

*If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.*