

# Managing cancer pain



**This information gives advice about managing cancer pain. There is a wide variety of safe, effective options for controlling pain. If pain is not well-managed it can affect your ability to work, to enjoy normal activities, and to relate to family and friends.**

## Dealing with pain

Not everyone with cancer will have pain, but many do. Pain is an uncomfortable and unpleasant physical sensation, as well as an emotional experience that occurs when tissues in the body are damaged. Nerves in the damaged part of the body send warning signals to the brain, which responds by making you feel pain or discomfort. You might experience it for only a short period or you could have chronic pain that affects your quality of life. Either way it should be treated.

Emotions can make pain better or worse. If you're anxious,

you may feel more pain. If you're relaxed, you may feel less pain.

Treating pain can help you feel better in a lot of ways. It can give you more energy and help reduce anxiety. You will be more able to enjoy life and sleep better.

## Pain and cancer

Pain can be a side effect of treatments, such as chemotherapy, radiation treatment, surgery or a medical procedure. It can occur because of cancer pressing on bone, nerves or body organs. Infection can also cause pain. Pain can develop from conditions unrelated to cancer, such as headaches, arthritis and muscle strain.

The amount of pain you have is not related to how severe your cancer is. Pain doesn't always get worse as the cancer develops. It is important to remember that cancer pain can almost always be reduced. Talking to your GP or your treatment team is the best way to get the help you may need to deal with pain.

## Talking to your treatment team

Early treatment is always more effective and the following steps can help with the right pain relief.

- The earlier you let your treatment team know about it, the easier it is to treat. You are the expert – only you know how you are feeling.
- Use words that describe your pain such as: sharp, shooting pain, aching, gnawing or burning. Describe where the pain is and when you are most likely to feel it.
- Try rating your pain from 1 to 10.
- Work out what makes your pain better or worse, for example changing position, using a hot-water bottle or ice pack?
- Does pain keep you awake? Keep a diary of your pain – when it begins, when it peaks, when you take medications, how much these help, and what you were doing at the time the pain occurred.



- If possible, take a friend or family member to appointments.
- If you are prescribed pain medication, give your treatment team feedback on whether it works.
- Take your medication exactly as prescribed.
- Watch out for side effects and report them to your treatment team.
- Common side effects include constipation, nausea and drowsiness. All of these can be managed if your treatment team know about them.
- Know how to reach your treatment team after hours.

## Finding the right pain relief for you

Your treatment team will aim to find the right combination of pain relief for you. They will assess how the pain is affecting you by doing a pain assessment.

Some people with cancer have constant pain, so they need to take painkillers regularly to keep the pain under control. If this is your situation, and you are prescribed painkillers, it's important to take them at regular intervals. This is to make sure the medicines work as well as possible.

- **Mild pain** is often successfully treated with painkillers called non-opioids, these include paracetamol and anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen.
- **Mild to moderate pain** is treated with opioids through a prescription, and include:
  - o dihydrocodeine
  - o codeine phosphate
  - o tramadol.
- **Moderate to severe pain** is usually treated with strong painkillers called opioids such as: morphine, fentanyl and oxycodone. With this type of painkiller it's important for your doctor to find the most effective dose for you. Two people with the same type of cancer may need different doses of the same medication, even if they're at the same stage of their illness.

Painkillers have side effects and these should be discussed carefully with your treatment team.

## Other ways to relieve pain

- There are other medications that are often given with painkillers to help relieve pain. These include steroids and muscle relaxants. For some types of pain, nerve-blocks and radiation treatment can be effective.

- Integrative (complementary) therapies, such as acupuncture, massage or relaxation techniques may help relieve pain.
- Specialized equipment, such as mattresses, a V-pillow, a sheepskin, or a cushion, can be helpful if you are spending a lot of time sitting or lying. Ask your treatment team for advice.

## Myths about pain medication

- Pain medication is addictive. FALSE.

People do not get high from pain medication and it is not addictive.

- Pain medication will stop working if you use it for a long period of time. FALSE.

If tolerance develops, your doctor can safely increase your dosage, prescribe a different medication, or use a combination of medicines.

- If medication does not work right away, it will not work at all. FALSE.

Everyone responds differently to different medication. It may take time to find the right combination.

- Living with pain is a sign of strength. FALSE.

If your pain is under control you will feel better.

## Useful websites

[Be.Macmillan, 'Managing pain'](#)

[Hospices of Auckland, Understanding morphine and other opioid medicines](#) (available in English, Korean, Samoan, Simplified Chinese, Tongan)

[Pain after surgery](#)

