



Patient & Family Guide
2020

Using Medication to Manage Pain

Pain Self-Management Program



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Using Medication to Manage Pain

Medications can be important in treating and managing both short-term and chronic (ongoing) pain.

Read the following statements and choose whether each statement is true or false. Circle T for true or F for false. The correct answers are on the next page.

1. Chronic pain is best managed by taking medication at different times each day.
T F
2. When you take medication for a long time, you need more medication to get the same amount of pain relief.
T F
3. Medication works about equally well to control short-term and chronic pain.
T F
4. Deciding when to take medication is much simpler when you take it at certain times instead of as needed.
T F
5. Taking medication as needed can increase your pain by causing you to focus on it more.
T F

Quiz answers:

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. T
5. T

Medication and short-term pain

Medication is most often used to manage short-term pain. It is very useful for this type of pain. With short-term pain, medication helps to keep your pain under control while you heal. When healing is done and the pain ends, you stop taking the medication.

For example: After surgery, people are usually given medication to control their pain. They are told to take the medication as needed. When pain medication is taken as needed, you use your pain to decide when to take your medication. This means you must monitor your pain all the time.

Medication and chronic pain

- When managing chronic pain, taking medication as needed may not be as helpful. For example:
 - › Over time, the same amount of medication may give less pain relief. You may then need more medication to control your pain.
 - › Waiting too long before taking your medication can allow your pain to get worse, so that when you do take your medication, it no longer gives relief. You may then need more medication to control your pain.
 - › When trying to decide when to take your medication, you think about how much pain you are in. This causes you to focus more on your pain. Focusing on your pain can increase the pain you feel.
- Deciding when to take your medication can also be hard. To make this decision, you may have to think about:
 - › Should I take the medication now, or save it for later?
 - › If I take the medication now, and it does not help, what will I do later?

Trying to decide can cause anxiety and stress, which can make your pain worse.

What is the best way to take medication for chronic pain?

You can take your pain medication at specific times, **no matter how much pain you are in at that time.**

Use the **amount of time** since you last took the medication to tell you when to take it. For example, you may take your medication every 8 hours.

Benefits of taking medication at certain times include:

- **Your pain is easier to manage.**
 - › Taking medication at regular times keeps your pain at a level where the medication still helps. You don't have to wait until the pain is bad to take your medication and then find out that the medication won't help.
- **You don't need to focus as much on your pain.**
 - › You can focus on other things in your life. This can help you have more time to enjoy life and be active.
- **You will have less anxiety and stress.**
 - › Since you don't have to decide when to take your medication, there is less anxiety or stress.

What if I get addicted?

Sometimes people may choose not to take their medication regularly because they are afraid of getting addicted to it. There is a difference between taking prescription medications to get “high” and taking prescription medications for pain relief.

You may have experienced negative reactions about taking medication from important people in your life, such as your family, friends, or coworkers.

What are the warning signs of addiction?

The goal of medication for chronic pain is to help lower your pain so you can be active. Being active can help improve your quality of life and helps you do things that are important to you.

4 warning signs of addiction: the “4 Cs”

1. **C**raving (strong desire)
2. **C**ompulsive use (using it even when you don’t want to)
3. Loss of **C**ontrol
4. **C**ontinued use despite bad **C**onsequences (results)

It is important to tell your health care provider if you have fears or concerns about taking a medication.

Dependence, tolerance, and withdrawal

Taking pain medication for a long time can cause physical changes. These changes include dependence, tolerance, and withdrawal.

Even if you do not become addicted to a medication, over time your body may become dependent on it. **Addiction and dependence are very different.**

Dependence: over time, your body needs the medication to work properly. This is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, many diabetics are dependent on insulin to live healthy lives.

Tolerance: your body has become used to the medication you are taking. Over time, the medication does not give the same amount of pain relief.

If this happens, your health care provider may increase the dosage (amount) of your medication. Sometimes switching between different medications can keep your pain under control.

It is important that the health care provider who prescribed the medication manages these changes. **Do not do this yourself!**

It is not unusual to develop a tolerance to medication. **But not everyone develops a tolerance.** Just because you start to take a medication, it does not mean you will need to take more to get the same amount of pain relief.

Withdrawal: this may happen if you suddenly stop taking a medication that your body has become dependent on.

Withdrawal is NOT a sign of addiction. It means that your body has become used to having the medication. Withdrawal is a natural reaction when your medication dosage is lowered or stopped.

Your health care provider may recommend that you change or lower your medication dosage slowly over time. This gives your body a chance to get used to having less of the medication and lowers the chance of withdrawal symptoms.

What are the possible side effects of medication for long-term pain?

Side effects are unpleasant problems caused by your medication. For example, your medication may help your migraine, but also give you heartburn.

Side effects may be different for each person. It is important that you tell your health care provider and pharmacist as soon as possible about any side effects you have. They can make changes to your medication so you can control your pain with fewer side effects.

Remember:

- It is important to have all of your medications prescribed by the same health care provider and filled at the same pharmacy, whenever possible.
- Make sure that you tell your health care provider and pharmacist about all over-the-counter medications you are taking. This includes herbal remedies (such as vitamins, minerals, teas, supplements, etc.). These may interact with your prescription medications.
- Find a way to make sure you take your medications on time and record that you have taken them. This way you will not take a double dose or miss a dose (or worry that you have). Talk with your pharmacist if you need help. Bring this record to all of your appointments with your health care provider.

- Use a notebook or a pain tracker app on your phone that you can bring to your appointments with your health care provider. Use it to keep track of any questions you may have, feedback from your health care provider, or reactions to medications, etc.

Over time it is easy to forget how you felt after taking a certain medication. Keeping a record lets you go back and check. It is also helpful to your health care provider.

By regularly using pain self-management strategies, you may be able to lower the amount of medication you need.

Resources

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

Opioids: How to use them safely

- › www.camh.ca/-/media/files/guides-and-publications/opioids-safe-use.pdf

Addiction: An information guide

- › www.camh.ca/-/media/files/guides-and-publications/addiction-guide-en.pdf

Government of Canada

Opioids: What Are They?

- › www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/documents/services/publications/healthy-living/opioids-what-are-they.pdf

