



Conquering the Pain of Cancer

Pain is one way the body has of telling us something is happening inside us.

Cancer pain can be caused by the growth of a tumor and by the side effects of treatments such as chemotherapy.

However, unrelieved pain does not have to be accepted as a normal part of having cancer, according to the American Cancer Society. Pain may worsen feelings of weakness, and it may interfere with your enjoyment of life and your ability to sleep and eat. It may even interfere with healing.

What should I do if I have pain?

Describe your pain to your health-care provider. There is no other way for your health-care provider to know how much or what kind of pain you have. Tell your doctors and nurses where you feel pain, and point to the place on your body or on a picture of the body. Describe what kind of sensation it is (sharp or dull, steady or pulsating, shooting or in one spot, burning, fullness, numbness, tingling, tightness, etc.); if it varies with the time of day, with a particular movement, or with general activity; and any possible “triggers” that start the pain.

Talk to your doctor about your concerns about pain medicines.

Many patients are uncomfortable asking for pain medication or for a higher dose because they fear becoming a drug addict. If you take opioid pain medication, your body will most likely become used to the medication (develop a tolerance), and you will need a higher dose to feel the same relief that a lower dose used to give you. Tolerance to pain medication and physical dependence are different from psychological dependence or drug abuse. Some patients are concerned about the side effects that opioids can cause, such as nausea, constipation, and difficulty thinking clearly. If side effects occur, a

change in the dosage or in the particular medication can help. Your doctor often will prescribe medications just for the side effects.

What is breakthrough pain?

Many people experience pain once in a while even after they have begun taking pain medicine regularly. This intermittent pain is called “breakthrough” pain because it “breaks through” the effects of the regular pain medication. If you experience this kind of pain, it does not mean that the regular pain medicine is not working. Breakthrough pain does not usually last very long but can be very intense. Certain fast-acting pain medications and techniques such as guided imagery and distraction can be very helpful in treating this kind of pain.

Keep your doctor updated about changes in your pain and in the medication's ability to control it.

Because pain is one of the body's ways of telling us what is happening, pain can help your doctor understand how your cancer is responding to treatment and how your whole body is responding to the cancer and to treatment. Also, the sooner your pain is treated, the better your chances of getting relief. If you wait, the pain medication will have to “catch up” with your pain, possibly requiring more than one dose of pain medication before you feel relief. You may have to wait a couple of hours before the second dose, and that is a long time to be in pain! Different medications may be tried until your doctor finds the one or ones that work best for you at a particular time.

Many ways to treat pain are available.

In addition to the different kinds of pain medications, some patients have found relief by using complementary techniques to ease pain. These techniques can be used at the same time as

pain medication. Some patients have found comfort through acupuncture and massage, which are available in many communities. Self-hypnosis, guided imagery, and biofeedback are pain management techniques that patients can learn from trained therapists through individual or group instruction. M. D. Anderson Cancer Center's Place...of Wellness offers classes in these and other techniques. You do not have to be a patient at M. D. Anderson to take these classes. If you are not able to come to M. D. Anderson, look in your community for spas and health clubs that offer instruction in similar mind-body techniques.



Ask to see a pain management specialist.

Just as some doctors specialize in the treatment of cancer or in the treatment of a certain kind of cancer, other doctors specialize in the treatment of pain. You can see a pain specialist on your own or ask your doctor to consult with a pain specialist if you feel you would like more options to help treat your pain than the ones your doctor offers you. These options may include other medications or certain anesthetic injections or surgical procedures for pain.

Above all, don't suffer in silence. Tell a doctor or nurse about any pain that you are having, and let them know when your pain medications aren't working. Remember, treatments for pain only work when they are used. ●

For more information, contact your physician or contact the M. D. Anderson Information Line:

 (800) 392-1611 within the United States, or

 (713) 792-6161 in Houston and outside the United States.

March 2003

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