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How to Manage Your

# Pain



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people who have pain before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What is cancer-related pain?

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Cancer pain causes you to hurt, feel uncomfortable or suffer.

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You may feel pain all of the time or only some of the time.

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**Everyone who has cancer pain** will feel it differently. Only you know how much pain you feel and how it affects you.

## Getting relief from pain is important.

### Treating your pain will help you:

Sleep and eat better

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Enjoy time with family and friends

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Do your work and hobbies

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You do not have to accept pain as a normal part of living with cancer.

### Tell your health care team about the pain that you feel:

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**Bone pain** can be felt as a deep throbbing pain that can be sharp at times. It may get worse when you are moving around.

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**Neuropathic pain** is from damage to your nerves. People say it is burning, shooting, piercing, stabbing or like an electric current. It might feel like pins and needles or tingling. It can hurt when things like clothing, water or wind touch your skin.

**Visceral pain** is from damage to the organs inside your body. It might feel like a dull, deep squeezing pain. It can be hard to tell exactly where it is coming from.

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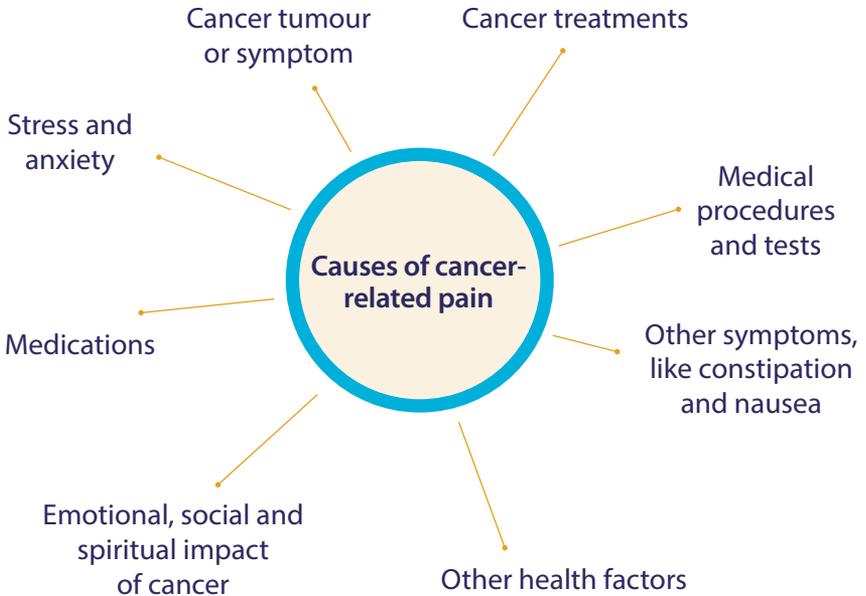
If you take regular medication for your pain, **breakthrough pain** may be felt between doses. It can happen very suddenly.

# What causes cancer-related pain?

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Understanding the cause of your pain will help your healthcare team treat it in the best way.

**This picture shows things that might cause cancer-related pain:**



# What can I do to manage my pain?

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## Take your pain medications as prescribed

Your doctor might prescribe more than one type of pain medication.



### The types of medications may be:

Over-the-counter medications that have acetaminophen (like Tylenol) or ibuprofen (like Advil).

Opioids, like codeine, morphine, hydromorphone, oxycodone, fentanyl and methadone.

Medications for nerve pain like pregabalin and gabapentin. Note: these medications may take days or even weeks to start working.

### Speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you:

Have trouble remembering to take your pills

Need help figuring out the right timing

### Opioid pain medications

Opioid medications are common to help manage cancer pain. Some are long-acting (work for a long time) and some are short-acting (work for a short time). They work together to control pain.

Long-acting medication is usually taken regularly. It is released slowly into your body and works for 8-12 hours.

Short-acting medication starts to work fast in about 20-30 minutes. It keeps working for 2-4 hours. It is usually taken for breakthrough pain.

**Take your long-acting medication on schedule, even if you do not feel pain at the moment.** If you are not in pain it means the medication is working well. It does not mean that you do not need to take your medication.

**Keep track of when** you take your medication for breakthrough pain. If you need these doses more often than normal, your doctor may need to change your medication.

### Be safe!

- ✔ Never crush or chew long-acting medications (pills or capsules). This may put too much medication into your body too fast and give you side effects. If swallowing pills is hard, ask your doctor or pharmacist about a different way to take them.
- ✔ Do not stop taking your pain medication suddenly. Many of these medications need to be stopped slowly. Your doctor or pharmacist will help you make a plan.
- ✔ Ask your health care team about what to do if you miss a dose of medication.
- ✔ Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medications.

### It is normal to feel nervous about taking pain medication.

**Some people do not take pain medications because they worry about addiction.** Your family may also worry about addiction and might not want you to take your pills. If you take your medication as your doctor prescribed, you should not worry. Addiction happens when a person takes medications for reasons other than pain.

**Some people think they should save their pain medication in case the pain gets worse later.** Pain should be treated early. If needed, your doctor can change your dose of pain medication and/or the type of medication you take. You do not need to suffer in pain.

## Side-effects of pain medication

**Side-effects of pain medication are common. Medication may cause:**



Constipation - not being able to have a bowel movement (go poo)

Nausea and vomiting (throwing up)

Sleepiness or drowsiness

Nausea, vomiting and sleepiness usually only last for a few days and will go away on their own.

**Constipation from opioid medications will not go away on its own.** You need to take laxatives the whole time you take opioid pain medication. Ask your health care team for more information.

### Be safe!

✔ **Do not take fibre supplements, like Metamucil, when you are taking pain medication.** They may make your constipation worse.

**Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these side-effects:**

- Confusion or if you start seeing and hearing things that are not really there
- A skin rash
- Trouble breathing

## Be active and exercise

### Even small, simple exercises may help your pain:

Walk to the end of your driveway or up and down your hallway.

Ride an indoor bike or do gentle yoga and stretching.

### Exercise Tips

Start slowly and go at your own pace.

If you are already active, talk to your health care team about your activities and make a plan to keep doing them.



### Exercise can also:

- Make you more hungry
- Give you more energy
- Help you get better sleep
- Build stronger muscles
- Give you a feeling of well-being
- Help your feelings of depression and anxiety

### If you need help making a plan to be more active, ask for a referral to a(n):

- Occupational therapist
- Physical therapist
- Exercise specialist
- Rehabilitation specialist
- Registered massage therapist

## Find support

It is normal to feel upset and frustrated when you are in pain. You can find support in your community and through your health care team.



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Talk to someone you trust about how your pain makes you feel.

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Talk to a trained counsellor either by yourself or as part of a group.

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Talk to someone at your place of worship.

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Join a peer support group online or in your community.

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Join a chronic pain self-management group. These programs have special sessions to teach you how to manage your pain. Ask your health care team about classes in your community.

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**If you feel** depressed or anxious, ask to speak to a social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist or someone who is an expert in helping people with cancer.

**To learn more about** online support groups check out the Canadian Cancer Society's Peer Support Service and talk to someone who has been there. For more information go to: **[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)**

## Get physical relief

### Ask your health care team about other treatments before you use them, like:

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machine.

Muscle relaxants and rubs like acetaminophen/methocarbamol (like Robaxacet), or diclofenac (like Voltaren Emulgel).

Using heat and/or ice on the body.

**Heat and ice** may not be safe if you are getting radiation therapy, chemotherapy or if you have numbness from nerve damage. Check with your health care team.



## Relaxing activities and managing stress may help to control your pain

### These activities may help you relax:

Breathing exercises

Distraction activities like watching TV or playing computer games

Healthy coping activities like walking outside, gardening, enjoying nature, reading or listening to music

### Some patients find that these complementary therapies help them take control of their pain:

Meditation

Hypnotism

Aromatherapy

Acupuncture

Yoga

Massage

Music therapy (from a music therapist)

Reflexology (a special massage for your hands and feet)

### If you want to try

complementary therapies, ask about your providers' safety standards. Some therapists need a license to do their work. Be especially careful when doing things that use needles, like acupuncture.

Guided imagery (imagining yourself in a pleasant, calm place)

Energy healing therapies like Healing Touch, Reiki or Qigong

**For more information** on these strategies see the Canadian Cancer Society's guide to Complementary Therapies. Go to:

**[www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)**

## Keep track of your pain

A pain diary can help you write down information about your pain. This will help you and your healthcare team know how your pain changes over time and what things make it better or worse.



### Here is a sample of a pain diary\* you could use:

0 is no pain and 10 is the worst possible pain.

Date & Time	Pain score (0-10)	Where pain is and how it feels	What I was doing when it began	Name and amount of medicine taken	Non-drug methods I tried	How long the pain lasted	Notes

\*Pain diary from the American Cancer Society

#### Patient Testimonial:

"Keeping a pain diary is a great communication tool for me and my doctor. Together we can understand how to adjust medications to feel better."

# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## **Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these symptoms:**

Pain that is not going away or is getting worse

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A new pain that you have not had before

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Pain when you take a deep breath

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Sudden leg weakness, especially if you have back pain

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## **What is symptom screening?**

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your pain.



0 is no pain and 10 is the worst possible pain.

**0-3**

You may have **Mild** pain if:

You have some pain but medications make it go away

You can do regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning or working

**4-6**

You may have **Moderate** pain if:

Your pain is causing you stress

Your pain medications do not always make the pain go away

You find it hard to do regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning or working

**7-10**

You may have **Severe** pain if:

You have a lot of pain everyday

Your pain is causing you a lot of stress

You cannot do regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning, or working

You have pain that comes on suddenly

You have new pain

Your muscles feel weak

Your health care team wants to know about your pain. Your concerns and questions are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### Cancer Care Ontario

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### Canadian Cancer Society

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

## Support services:

### Canadian Cancer Society Community Services Locator

[www.cancer.ca/csl](http://www.cancer.ca/csl)

### Canadian Cancer Society Peer Support Service

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### Cancer Chat Canada

[www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca)

## Booklets:

### Pain relief:

#### **A guide for people with cancer**

[www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

1-888-939-3333

#### **Support for people with cancer: pain control**

[www.cancer.gov/publications](http://www.cancer.gov/publications)

## Books:

**Managing Pain before  
it Manages You** — 4<sup>th</sup> edition,  
Margaret A. Caudill, 2016

**The pain survival guide:  
how to reclaim your life** —  
Dennis Turk, 2006



The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Guide: Tips to help you manage your symptoms: Pain (The Ottawa Hospital)
- Pain we can help (Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre)
- How to take your Opioid Pain Medication (Juravinski Cancer Centre)
- American Cancer Society's pain diary was found here at the time of print: [www.cancer.org/acs/groups/cid/@nho/documents/webcontent/pain-diary.pdf](http://www.cancer.org/acs/groups/cid/@nho/documents/webcontent/pain-diary.pdf)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about pain. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing pain. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

**Need this information in an accessible format?**

1-855-460-2647 | TTY (416) 217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

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