



# PERSISTENT PAIN | In Older People

## How Pain Can Affect Your Life

### Pain can affect all parts of your life.

#### It can:

- ▶ Make it difficult to work
- ▶ Decrease your ability to perform “activities of daily living,” such as cleaning, traveling, and cooking
- ▶ Be associated with depression and anxiety
- ▶ Cause stress in family relationships
- ▶ Cause you to avoid contact with people that you care about

It is important to talk with your healthcare provider about your pain so that you can develop a treatment plan

## Pain: Know the Signs

Pain can be a problem for people of all ages, but it may be especially difficult to diagnose and treat in older adults who may have dementia or other medical conditions. It is important to be able to recognize signs of pain in someone that you care about who may not be able to describe pain to her healthcare provider. Here are some signs of pain to look out for:

- ✓ Grimacing
- ✓ Fidgeting
- ✓ Rocking
- ✓ Tension or irritability
- ✓ Crying

This handout will discuss some of the reasons that persistent pain is an issue for older adults, and ways that persistent pain can be assessed and treated.

## What is persistent pain?

*Persistent*, or *chronic*, pain is pain that lasts for longer than 3 months. It can be caused by an injury or surgery, or it may not have a known cause. Persistent pain affects 25% to 50% of older adults, and is often associated with medical conditions that are more common in older people. Some examples include:

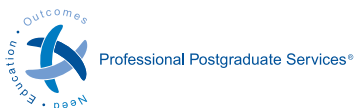
- ▶ Problems with bones and muscles, such as a strain or sprain.
- ▶ *Arthritis*—swelling of the joints, which commonly occurs in the knees or fingers.
- ▶ *Osteoarthritis*—a breakdown of *cartilage* in the joints. Cartilage is the connective tissue found on bones. When this tissue breaks down, joints and bones rub against one another, causing pain.
- ▶ *Cancer pain*—caused by the cancer itself and/or the chemotherapy and radiation used to treat the cancer.
- ▶ *Neuropathic pain*, or pain in the nerves. One type, *diabetic peripheral neuropathy*, feels like electricity or “pins-and-needles” in the hands and feet, and is associated with nerve damage caused by diabetes. The second type, *postherpetic neuralgia*, is a burning/tingling under the skin that is caused by shingles. *Shingles* is a painful rash that occurs when the virus that causes chickenpox becomes active again. Postherpetic neuralgia occurs when the shingles heals but the pain remains. It is more common in older adults or those with weak immune systems.

## Why is persistent pain a problem in older adults?

Because persistent pain has many different causes, it can be difficult to diagnose and treat in older people. This is especially true if someone has problems with memory, attention, language, and problem-solving that make it hard for them to do their normal, everyday activities. These problems may be signs of a condition called *dementia*. Older adults with dementia may find it difficult to describe pain to their healthcare provider or rate their pain on a pain scale. Depression is common in older people, as well, and can make pain worse; persistent pain can also cause depression.

## How is persistent pain assessed?

Your healthcare provider will measure your pain with a pain scale that describes how severe your pain is. Some scales range from 0 to 10, where a score of 0 is no pain and 10 is the worst pain. Your healthcare provider may also ask you about the type of pain you are experiencing. For example, is your pain sharp, dull, or aching? Where does it hurt? What time of day do you feel the most pain? The answers to these questions will help your healthcare provider work with you in developing a treatment plan.



The National Initiative on Pain Control® (NIPC®) is sponsored by Professional Postgraduate Services®, Secaucus, NJ.

The NIPC is supported by an educational grant from Endo Pharmaceuticals Inc.

Copyright © 2009 Professional Postgraduate Services®. All rights reserved.



## How is persistent pain treated?

There are many treatments available for persistent pain. Talk with your healthcare provider about any medications that you may be taking or any health conditions that you may have before starting any pain treatment. You should also let your healthcare provider know as soon as possible if you have any side effects from your pain medication.

### Some drug treatments can be useful for different types of persistent pain:

- ▶ Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as *aspirin*, *naproxen*, and *diclofenac*, block chemicals in your body that cause pain. Some NSAIDs are available as pills or tablets, and others are available in topical forms that can be applied to the skin.
- ▶ *Acetaminophen* is a medication that is commonly used to relieve different types of pain.
- ▶ Topical analgesics, such as *lidocaine patches*, work by stopping the nerves from sending pain signals.
- ▶ Opioids block pain messages that your body sends from reaching the brain. Some types of opioids include *hydrocodone*, *morphine*, *codeine*, *oxycodone*, *methadone*, *fentanyl*, and *oxymorphone*.
- ▶ Antidepressants such as *duloxetine* can be used to treat both pain and depression associated with pain.
- ▶ Anticonvulsants, such as *gabapentin* and *pregabalin*, work by changing the way that the body senses pain.

### Non-drug treatments can also be helpful for persistent pain:

- ▶ Physical therapy and/or exercise to reduce pain and increase mobility.
- ▶ Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), for sore joints and muscles. TENS is a type of therapy that uses low-voltage electrical currents to decrease pain. The electrical currents flow through wires that are applied to the skin over the muscle that hurts.
- ▶ Cognitive/behavioral therapy helps people learn how to think differently about their pain, and learn new ways of understanding and controlling their pain, such as deep breathing, relaxation, or distraction.
- ▶ Acupuncture involves the placement of small needles into specific parts of the body to ease pain.
- ▶ Over-the-counter topical creams, gels, rubs, or sprays, which can be applied to the skin for muscle and bone problems.

Your healthcare provider will know which treatment approach is best for you.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION: Talk to Your Healthcare Provider.

Neighborhood Home Health Care  
1650 E. Walnut Street  
Suite B  
Pasadena, CA 91106  
(626) 584-5923

### Persistent Pain: MYTHS AND FACTS

- ▶ **MYTH:** Pain is a normal part of aging, so I should just “deal with it.”
- ▶ **FACT:** It is true that pain is more common as we get older, but it is not a normal part of aging; it is a sign that something is wrong. All pain should be taken seriously and treated.
- ▶ **MYTH:** I will become addicted to my pain medicine if I have to take it every day.
- ▶ **FACT:** Medicines that are used to treat pain usually do not cause addiction if they are prescribed and taken correctly.
- ▶ **MYTH:** I don’t know what is causing my pain, so my health-care provider will not believe me.
- ▶ **FACT:** Persistent pain often has no known cause. Your healthcare provider will work with you to understand your pain and what might be causing it. He should perform a thorough examination and discuss with you the appropriate treatment for your pain.

**REFERENCES** American Geriatrics Society. Pain management. Available at: [www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/chapters\\_ch\\_trial.asp?ch=19](http://www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/chapters_ch_trial.asp?ch=19). • American Geriatrics Society Panel on Persistent Pain in Older Persons. *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 2002;50(6 suppl):S205-S224. • Beers MH, Jones TV, eds. Merck Manual of Geriatrics. 3rd ed. Available at: [www.merck.com/mkgr/mmg/sec6/ch43/ch43a.jsp](http://www.merck.com/mkgr/mmg/sec6/ch43/ch43a.jsp) • Ernst E. *Nat Clin Pract Rheumatol*. 2006;2(2):74-80. • Keefe FJ. *The Clinical Psychologist*. 1996;49(3):4-5. • Merskey H, Bogduk N, eds. Classification of chronic pain, second edition. Seattle, WA: IASP Press;1994:209-214. • National Family Caregivers Association. Advocating for a loved one in pain. Available at: [http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/caregiving\\_resources/aapm.cfm](http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/caregiving_resources/aapm.cfm) • National Pain Foundation Website. Common pain causes among older adults. Available at: <http://www.nationalpainfoundation.org/articles/245/pain-causes-among-older-adults> • Rudy TE, et al. *Pain*. 2007;131(3):293-301. • Weiner DK, et al. *Pain Med*. 2006;7(1):60-70. • All websites accessed April 5, 2009.