Controlling Your Pain

Our goal for treating pain
A certain amount of pain may be expected for many patients, such as those recovering from surgery. Today, pain is no longer something you “just have to put up with.” With medicines and other therapies, it’s possible to prevent, relieve and sometimes get rid of pain altogether. Our goal is to do everything we can to work with you to control your pain and keep you comfortable.

Good pain control can help you:
• Eat, sleep and move better.
• Get well faster. With less pain, you can walk more, do your breathing and physical exercises better, and regain your strength more quickly. You may even leave the hospital sooner.
• Improve your results after surgery. Patients whose pain is well controlled seem to do better after surgery and avoid problems like pneumonia and blood clots.

Working together to control pain
It is important to set goals for pain control with your health care team (doctors, nurses and other caregivers). Being “comfortable” means that your pain control lets you rest. But, it also means you are able to do the activities needed to recover and maintain your quality of life. Your caregivers will be asking you to set goals for pain control at rest and with activity. If your pain goals change, talk with your caregivers.

Describing your pain
Tell your caregivers that you have pain, even if they don’t ask. Your doctor or nurse will ask you to describe how bad your pain is on a scale of 0 (no pain at all) to 10 (the worst possible pain). They may use other pain scales that use words or pictures (faces). Tell them where and when it hurts and if anything brings on the pain.


The following words can be used to describe your pain:

- Aching
- Burning
- Comes/Goes
- Constant
- Cramping
- Discomfort
- Dull
- Heavy
- Incisional
- Pressing
- Pricking
- Pulling
- Radiating
- Sharp
- Shooting
- Stabbing
- Tender/sore
- Tightness
- Throbbing

You also will be asked about what makes the pain worse and what makes it better. We will let you sleep during the night between your care activities, unless you ask us to wake you. Call your nurse if you wake up and are in pain. The more your caregivers know about your pain, the better they can treat it.

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Developing your pain control plan
Your caregivers will work with you to set your pain control goals and to develop a plan to keep you comfortable and active – designed just for you. You often will be asked to “rate” your pain to help us know if your medicine and other treatments are working. We want to treat your pain before it becomes too strong and out of control.

Using pain medications
We want you to understand the medicines you are taking for pain, why you need these medicines, and what possible side effects you could have. Pain medicine can be given in many forms. Your doctor may prescribe a pill, liquid or injection (shot) for you. Pain medicine also can be given through a tube in your vein (IV). Some people are able to use patient-controlled analgesia (PCA), a special pump that allows the person to give themselves medicine when they hurt. The most common side effects of pain medicine are upset stomach, nausea, constipation, dizziness, sleepiness, confusion, itching or problems with urination.

Ask for pain medicine at least 30 minutes before any activities that cause discomfort or pain (repositioning, getting up, walking and bathing, and before breathing treatments, wound care or physical therapy). This allows the pain medicine to begin working before the activity starts and will improve your pain control. The more comfortable you are during these activities, the more they will help you.

Medications called “opioids” often are used for people who have more severe pain. Your health care team will give you instructions to prevent and treat constipation, a condition that may occur while taking these medicines. When opioid medication is taken for several weeks, the body gets used to the medication effect, a normal condition known as “tolerance.” Tolerance means that “withdrawal symptoms” like sweating, anxiety, irritability, nausea or diarrhea, may occur if the opioid is stopped suddenly. Tolerance symptoms are normal and not the same as being “addicted.” It just means that when opioids are no longer needed, the dose must be decreased gradually.

Using non-medication pain treatments
To reduce pain and help you to relax, the following non-drug pain treatments also can be used:
• Position your body for comfort; reposition often
• Hot or cold packs
• Music
• Relaxation techniques
• Massage

Example: Jaw relaxation is an exercise that can be completed in just a few minutes:
1. Let your lower jaw drop slightly as if you are starting a yawn.
2. Rest your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Soften your lips.
3. Breathe slowly and rhythmically while breathing in and breathing out, and then rest.
4. Repeat the pattern breathing in and breathing out, and resting while continuing to relax your jaw. Feel the tension leaving your body.

Managing pain at home
Your health care team will work with you to plan your pain control, and help you to continue your recovery and healing at home.
• Before you leave the hospital, make sure you understand the medications you will be taking at home, why you need these medications and possible side effects.
• Make a written schedule, take your medications and do treatments as instructed.
• Give your medication time to work. Oral medicines can take 20 minutes or more to work before you start to feel better.
• Medications work better when you relax.
• If your pain is not being relieved, getting worse or has changed, call your health care provider.
• Take your medications with food to avoid an upset stomach, unless told not to do so.
• Never drink alcoholic beverages while taking pain medications.
• Pace yourself. Get up and move around. Plan rest periods to keep from feeling fatigued or overtired.
• Keep your pain medications safe and out of reach of children/teens.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.