

Pain

What is it?

Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience that may be associated with tissue damage, but which may also exist in the absence of any identifiable cause. It can be acute—as the result of an injury—or chronic, lasting after the injury has healed. Pain itself is defined by the person experiencing it.

What are the symptoms?

Pain is rated on a scale of 0-10, with 0 being no pain and 10 being the worst pain imaginable.

- Mild to moderate (1-3)
- Moderate to severe (4-6)
- Severe (7-10)

How is it diagnosed?

Pain is diagnosed based on your report of how you feel. Keeping a pain journal and documenting when the pain occurs and its severity can help you provide an accurate assessment of your pain over time.

How is it treated?

The first step in treating pain is trying to identify the location and cause of the pain.

Treatment depends on the severity of the pain:

Mild-to-moderate: Over-the-counter medications, such as Tylenol® (acetaminophen), or Advil® or Motrin® (ibuprofen), usually suffice.

Moderate-to-severe: *Opioids*, the strongest pain-relieving medications available, are typically used. They include dihydrocodeine, propoxyphene, hydrocodone, and Ultram® (tramadol). Acetaminophen or a nonsteroidal antiinflammatory medication may be added.

Severe pain: A stronger opioid, such as morphine, oxycodone, hydromorphone, methadone, levorphanol, or fentanyl may be used. Long-acting opioids are often used to control severe pain, with short-acting opioids added for breakthrough pain.

Nondrug methods used to treat pain include:

- *Transcutaneous nerve stimulation (TENS)*: This device transmits electrical impulses through electrodes attached to your skin.
- Acupressure or acupuncture
- Guided imagery, in which you visualize a comforting scene to help you relax and stop focusing on the pain.
- Physical therapy



Tips to Help

- Take your “as needed” pain medication at the first sign of pain; don’t wait for the pain to become severe.
- If your pain relief doesn’t last as long as it should, ask about extended-release (long-acting) medications.
- Tell your doctor about any side effects related to pain medication, such as constipation. Most side effects clear up with time.
- Don’t let the fear of addiction influence your decision about taking strong pain medicine. Addiction is rarely a problem. Instead, you may become *tolerant* to the pain medication, which means higher doses are needed to provide the same relief.

Words to Know

Opioid: A synthetic drug used to relieve pain.

Suppository: A form of medication that melts when it is inserted into an opening of the body, such as the rectum.

Tolerance: When a person needs higher doses of a medication to manage the symptoms.

Transcutaneous nerve stimulation (TENS): The transmission of electrical impulses through electrodes to relieve pain.