

Managing Your Pain

At Northwestern Memorial Hospital, it is important to us that you are as comfortable as possible. Our goal is to work with you to safely:

- Reduce your pain.
- Improve your function.

*It is important
to let your
doctors and
nurses know
when you
are in pain.*

What can I do to get good pain relief?

- Talk to your doctors and nurses about your pain. We cannot always tell when you are having pain. Therefore, it is important to let your doctors and nurses know when you are in pain.
- Point to where the pain is located.
- Describe how the pain feels: aching, throbbing or burning. There may be many ways to describe your pain.
- Rate your pain on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning no pain and 10 the worst pain you could imagine.
- List pain medicines you have taken in the past and how well they have worked for you.
- Tell your doctor and nurse how well your current pain medicine is working.
- Remember that it is not possible or safe to get rid of all pain. But our goal to keep you comfortable so that you are able to:
 - Rest and sleep.
 - Cough and breathe deeply.
 - Get out of bed.

What medicines are used to relieve pain?

Many different medicines can be used to treat pain. The choice of a medicine is based upon your type of pain. In general, there are 3 types of pain medicines:

- **Nonopioids.** These medications include acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and antiinflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as aspirin and ibuprofen, also called Motrin® or Advil®. Some of these medicines are available without a prescription. Common medicines taken with prescription medicines or in large doses, can cause serious side effects, such as bleeding and liver damage. Be certain to ask your doctor before taking any medicines that have not been prescribed.

- **Opioids.** Sometimes called “narcotics,” these medicines are used for moderate to severe pain. Narcotics may make you drowsy. Do not drive a car or other vehicles or use dangerous equipment. Avoid alcohol use.
- **Other medicines.** These medicines are used for other problems, but are useful in relieving pain. For example, some anti-seizure drugs and antidepressants can reduce pain. Local anesthetics, such as Novocaine®, often can be helpful. Steroids can be used for some types of pain. Side effects vary with each medicine. Talk with your doctor about what to expect and which side effects should be reported.

How should I take my pain medicines?

Instructions will be given to you about your pain medicines. Pain medicines can be taken as a pill or liquid. These can be just as powerful as injections. Oral pain relievers, such as acetaminophen, and anti-inflammatory medicines, such as ibuprofen, should be taken with a full glass of water to speed up their action and to reduce side effects.

Most oral pain medicine begins working in 20 to 30 minutes, with full effect noted in about 1 to 2 hours. If you cannot swallow or your stomach cannot digest well, medicines can be given by injection IV (into the vein) or in the skin (subcutaneous). Other methods also are available.

When should I take my pain medicines?

It is best to take your pain medicines before the pain becomes severe. Once pain becomes severe, it is more difficult to relieve. Many people find it helpful to take pain medicines before walking or other activities that may trigger pain. This prevents the pain before it starts. When pain is constant, medicines may be given on a regular schedule to keep the pain under control. Ask your nurse when:

- You can have the next dose of pain medicine.
- Is the best time to take it.

Are there side-effects to pain medicines?

All medicines have side-effects, but not all people get them. Most side-effects happen in the first few hours of treatment and slowly go away. These might include nausea and vomiting, sleepiness and constipation. Your doctors and nurses can give you medicines to prevent or treat these side-effects.

- Tell your nurse right away if you feel too sleepy or are having any breathing problems.

Opioids can slow breathing, especially at night or if you are taking other medicines that cause sleepiness. For your safety, we may wake you to evaluate your breathing. We will check on you often.

Are there other ways to relieve pain?

Many people find that cold packs, heating pads and massage help reduce pain. Music or TV may distract you from the pain. Relaxation exercises can be helpful.

If you are in the hospital, relaxation videos can be found through the on-demand Patient Education TV system and include *Relaxing Through the Seasons*, access title No. 122. This video guides you through 5 easy relaxation exercises. *Rhythmic Medicine*, title No. 121, uses nature scenes and calming music to help ease stress. Your nurse can help you access these videos.

These are some of the most commonly asked questions about pain. Remember, the doctors, nurses and other staff members at Northwestern Memorial care about your comfort and safety. If you have other questions, please ask your doctor or nurse.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center. This state-of-the-art health library is located on the 3rd floor of the Galter Pavilion. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Center by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nm.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312-926-3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312-926-3112, TDD/TTY 312-944-2358 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312-926-1920, TDD/TTY 312-695-3661.

Developed by: Cancer Pain Program

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900722 (12/14)