

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 ability to do the things you want to do

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

How to get the best possible pain relief

- Talk with your physicians and nurses about your pain and when you feel pain. We cannot always tell when you are in pain.
- Point to where your pain is located.
- Describe how your pain feels. Use words such as aching, throbbing or burning. There may be many words that describe your pain.
- Rate your pain on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning no pain and 10 meaning the worst pain you could imagine.
- List pain medications you have taken in the past and how well they worked for you.
- Tell your physicians and nurses how well your current pain medication is working.
- Remember that it is not possible or safe to get rid of all pain. Our goal is to keep you comfortable so you are able to:
 - Rest and sleep
 - Cough and breathe deeply
 - Get out of bed

Medications used to relieve pain

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

- **Non-opioid medications** – These medications include acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as aspirin and ibuprofen (Motrin®, Advil®). Some of these medications are available without a prescription. Common medications, taken with prescription medications or in large doses, can cause serious side effects. These include bleeding and liver damage. Talk with your physician before taking any medication that has not been prescribed.

- **Opioid medications** – Sometimes called “narcotics,” these medications are used for moderate to severe pain. Narcotics may make you drowsy. Do not drive a car or other vehicles or use dangerous equipment. Do not drink alcohol.
- **Other medications** – Some medications used for other problems may help relieve your pain. For example, some anti-seizure medications and antidepressants can reduce pain. Local anesthetics, such as lidocaine, often can be helpful. Steroids can be used for some types of pain. Side effects vary with each medication. Talk with your physician about what to expect and which side effects you should tell your physician about.

How to take pain medication

Instructions will be given to you about your pain medication. You can take pain medication as a pill, liquid or patch. These methods can be just as powerful as an injection to provide pain relief and usually provide longer pain control. Pain relievers taken by mouth (oral) should be taken with a full glass of water to speed up their action and reduce side effects.

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

When to take pain medication

It is best to take your pain medication before the pain becomes severe. Once your pain becomes severe, it is more difficult to relieve. Many people find it helpful to take pain medication before walking or doing other activities that may trigger pain. This prevents the pain before it starts. When your pain is constant, you may receive medication on a regular schedule to keep your pain under control. Ask your nurse when you can have the next dose of pain medication or when the best time is to take it.

Side effects

All medications 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
- Constipation

Your physicians and nurses can give you other medication to prevent or treat these side effects.

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

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

Other ways to relieve pain

Many people find that cold packs, heating pads and massage help reduce pain. Listening to music or watching TV may distract you from your pain. Relaxation exercises can be helpful. Many smartphone apps are available to guide you through breathing and relaxation techniques.

If you are in the hospital, you can find relaxation videos on the patient education video system. Your nurse can help you access these videos.

The physicians, nurses and other staff members at Northwestern Memorial Hospital care about your comfort and safety. If you have other questions or concerns, please ask your physician or nurse.