

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT YOUR PAIN

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Nagging, burning, or aching—no one feels your pain exactly the same way you do. How can you talk to your doctor about your pain in such a way, that together you may be able to achieve pain relief?

Know that you are not alone: There are two types of pain, acute pain that is temporary and chronic pain, which may last from a few months to many years. Such factors as your age, mood, and general health affect the way your body registers its discomfort. This is sometimes referred to as your “pain threshold”. According to a recent Gallop Poll, nine of ten Americans report that they have pain at least once a month.

You have the right to have your pain properly treated: There is a growing awareness that freedom from pain is a primary quality of life issue for our nation. In the year 2000, Congress declared “The Decade of Pain Control and Research.” New national pain assessment standards require that, when you enter a hospital or health care facility, you have the right to have your pain properly treated. Patients should expect at least to be asked to rate how they are feeling, from zero being without pain, to ten, which is the worst pain. In California, there is the California Pain Patients Bill of Rights and Intractable Pain Act, which directs that a doctor must either treat the pain you feel, or refer you to a qualified specialist who will treat your pain.

Why do I feel that I can't talk about my pain? Society sometimes supports the view that getting older means becoming stoic about our pain. After all, we're not young anymore, and we are not feeling youthful. So why not just “Grin and bear it?”

As a good patient, we may not want to bother the doctor. We view him as the professional, and we hope to feel better if we do what he suggests. The doctor might even prescribe something that we can't afford. What would we have to give up, in order to obtain the appropriate treatment for pain?

Some individuals are afraid of becoming addicted to pain medications, so they choose to suffer instead. For someone with chronic pain, there can be concern about becoming tolerant to pain medications, or worry about side effects.

What will my doctor want to know? Some people find it helpful to keep a daily journal. Document such things as where your pain occurs in your body, and when. Write down how often you feel the pain, and rate it on a scale of one to ten. (Ten being the most severe.) Does your pain interfere with your activities of daily living? If so, document what you have done to ease your discomfort. If you are currently taking any medications or therapies, be sure



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to include those. Are they helping? Bring your journal with you when you go to your physician.

Caring for someone without a voice: If you are a caregiver for someone who cannot verbally express their pain, it becomes necessary for you to become a good observer. Use your senses to determine if there has been a change in that person's health. Look for weight loss, unusual gait, pacing. Check for different odors. Note changes in mood such as increased agitation, tearfulness or irritability. Does the person rub or even avoid contact on a certain part of his body? Write down all the changes you observe, and talk to their physician.

How will my pain be treated? Depending upon your medical history, your physician may suggest one or more of the following: medications aimed at reducing pain and depression; electric stimulation; nerve block which can aid in confirming the diagnosis or be part of the treatment; surgery; individual or group therapy to assist in developing positive coping skills and reduce stress; behavior modification; physical or occupational therapy for conditioning and stabilization; relaxation and meditation; hypnosis; biofeedback to teach the patient how to relax and control body functions; or acupuncture.

For more information on pain and patients rights, Vital Connections on the Internet at <http://www.vitalco.net> provides easy access to all of these important resources:

California Wellness Foundation

American Academy of Pain Management

The Mayday Pain Project

International Assoc. for Pain Study

National Foundation for the Treatment of Pain

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