

Chronic Pain

What is chronic pain?

Many cancer survivors experienced pain during their treatment and found ways to manage it with the help of their health care teams. For some survivors, the pain they experienced went away after their treatment ended. However, there are survivors who have to live with chronic pain.

It's understandable if dealing with chronic pain upsets you or overwhelms you at times. In order to manage chronic pain successfully, you should form a strong partnership with your health care team. You should let your health care team know how this pain is affecting your life. They can help you address the physical causes of chronic pain and also address the emotional side effects of having to live with pain on a daily basis.

There are many causes for chronic pain, and each survivor may deal with chronic pain differently. If you experience chronic pain during your survivorship, there are ways to manage it and perhaps lessen how much chronic pain affects your quality of life.

Why do some survivors experience chronic pain?

Not every survivor experiences chronic pain. For those who do have chronic pain, the causes can vary. Chronic pain can result from:

- from the cancer itself
- from the treatment of cancer like surgery, radiation or chemotherapy

Peripheral Neuropathy

Some chemotherapy medicines can cause peripheral neuropathy. Peripheral neuropathy is a condition that can cause:

- ✓ Tingling
- ✓ Burning
- ✓ Numbness
- ✓ Weakness as a result of nerve damage

It usually begins in the hands or feet and can be temporary or permanent. Most of the time the pain caused by peripheral neuropathy will go away when the treatment stops. However, if your nerves become permanently damaged, chronic pain can develop.

Some examples of chemotherapy medicines that may cause peripheral neuropathy are:

- ✓ Taxol
- ✓ Vincristine
- ✓ Taxotere
- ✓ Cisplatin

Bone Pain

If you took steroids as part of your treatment for cancer, you may be at risk for chronic bone pain during your survivorship. Steroids can cause the bones to grow weaker or to lose blood flow to the joint. This can lead to osteoporosis or osteonecrosis (avascular necrosis or AVN), which may cause chronic bone pain.

Sometimes radiation therapy is used to treat cancer. Depending on where the radiation field is located, you may develop painful side effects. Most of these side effects are not long lasting and can usually be treated. Radiation therapy, however, can cause damage to bones, nerves and organs in your body that may lead to chronic pain.

When should survivors talk to their health care team about the pain they are experiencing?

Some examples of times you should talk to your health care team about your pain:

- If you experience a new pain
- If your current pain medication stops working
- If the pain changes or feels different to you
- If you develop painful swelling in the arm or leg
- If you feel pain, numbness, tingling or a burning sensation in your hands or feet

Some examples of things you should tell your health care team about your pain:

- How severe your pain is from 0 (no pain at all) to 10 (pain as bad as it can be)
- How much your pain interferes with your life and what activities it interferes with
- What other symptoms you have in addition to the pain or from treatments for the pain

What are some pain management strategies that survivors can discuss with their health care team?

Even if you experience chronic pain, there are things your health care team can do to help reduce or eliminate how much pain you feel. Forming a strong partnership with your health care team may help you manage the pain.

Non-drug interventions can be as effective as medication for chronic pain. Examples of non-drug interventions that can help with chronic pain include:

- Hypnosis
- Acupuncture
- Massage
- Guided imagery
- Cognitive and behavioral skills for managing your life around the painful times

Many times these interventions are most effective when combined with medications.

Some examples of pain management strategies you may want to discuss with your health care team:

- For some pain, a member of your health care team may prescribe a medication called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDS). The most common types of this medication are aspirin and ibuprofen.
- For moderate to severe pain, a member of your health care team may prescribe medication to go along with the NSAID.
- For neuropathic pain your health care team may also use what are called adjuvant medications. These are medicines that have been proven to relieve pain even though that is not their primary purpose. An example is Neurontin, an antiseizure medication, which can help nerve pain. Another example is Elavil, which is primarily used as an antidepressant. These can be effective for neuropathic pain even if you do not have seizures or are not depressed because they work on nerve signals.

If medication does not effectively control your pain, your health care team may suggest other methods for managing your pain. Your health care team may suggest a technique called a nerve block, where medication is injected into the spinal column to block the nerves so that you will not feel the pain.

Every survivor is different and every survivor may respond differently to pain management strategies. Sometimes trying a number of methods is needed before you find what works best for you. That's why open communication with your health care team can help you figure out together what strategies work best to manage your pain.

What are some suggestions for survivors who are trying to manage chronic pain?

- Use the Cancer Survivor's Health Journal to prepare for your next visit with a member of your health care team
- Talk to your health care team about any medication they prescribe for pain
- Keep track of any medication you take for pain
- Ask your health care team about complementary therapies

When pain is not treated properly, you may be:

- ✓ Tired
- ✓ Depressed
- ✓ Angry
- ✓ Worried
- ✓ Lonely
- ✓ Stressed
- ✓ Not sleeping well

When cancer pain is managed properly, you can:

- ✓ Enjoy being active
- ✓ Sleep better
- ✓ Enjoy family and friends
- ✓ Improve your appetite
- ✓ Enjoy sexual intimacy
- ✓ Prevent depression

Resources

Cancer-Pain.org

www.cancer-pain.org

This Web site focuses entirely on managing cancer pain. Information for survivors includes suggestions for tracking and describing pain, talking to your health care team about pain, and looking at the areas of your life that can be affected by pain, such as sleep and appetite. Many cancer pain treatments are described. A separate section for caregivers is included.

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