

TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Village Out-Patient Clinic - 100 Old Billerica Rd., Bedford, MA 01730

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Safe Strategies for Managing Pain

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Pain can be either acute or chronic. Acute pain is often the result of an injury and generally resolves within a few weeks. Chronic pain persists over a prolonged period of time. This type of pain is common in older adults. There are a number of conditions that lead to chronic pain including arthritis, neuropathies, and certain types of cancer among others.

Chronic pain can lead to a decline in physical and emotional health. When pain limits one's desire or ability to participate in activities, deconditioning occurs which in turn can lead to worsening pain and disability. Some people tend to ignore pain, believing it is a normal part of aging or because of a lack of desire to pursue testing or treatments. Chronic pain is common in older adults but should not be thought of as a "normal" part of aging. While there might not be a "cure" for the source of the pain, there are many ways to make it more manageable.

The first step is to have the pain evaluated. You might be asked to give a number to the pain, this is how pain is measured by healthcare providers. X-rays or other tests are sometimes needed for evaluation. A clinical assessment will determine if that is necessary. There are a multitude of options for managing pain, including pharmacologic and

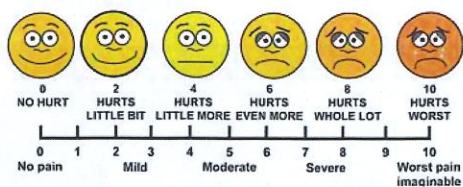
non-pharmacologic remedies. While one should not rely on medication alone to manage pain, it can play a vital role. Over the counter (OTC) medication is the first line of treatment and readily available. When medication is recommended, careful consideration is given to each person's unique medical history. Changes that occur with aging can have a significant impact on side effects with seemingly safe medication.

The most commonly used OTC medications are acetaminophen (Tylenol) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs also known as NSAIDs (Ibuprofen and naproxen). Some common brand names of NSAIDs are Advil, Motrin and Aleve.

- Acetaminophen has a well established safety record and is often recommended as an initial treatment for mild to moderate pain in older adults. That said, taking more than the recommended amount can lead to liver damage, especially if taken concurrently with more than three alcoholic drinks per day. Certain prescription pain medications (Ultracet, Percocet, Vicodin), cold products and sleep aids also contain acetaminophen. Taking combination medication with Acetaminophen could lead to inadvertently exceeding the recommended dose of 3000mg per day. Be aware of the abbreviation APAP which is sometimes used on a label when acetaminophen is contained in the prescription.



PAIN MEASUREMENT SCALE



- NSAIDs are also widely used for mild to moderate pain but the risk of side effects for older adults is quite different than with Acetaminophen. This is especially true with higher doses or long term use and can sometimes even lead to hospitalization or death. Adverse events such as gastrointestinal bleeding, heart attack, stroke and congestive heart failure are very real possibilities. The risk of bleeding is even higher for anyone also taking aspirin or other anticoagulants such as Coumadin, Eliquis or Xarelto. It is also worth noting that some NSAIDs such as Ibuprofen can actually counteract the heart protective effect of aspirin because of the effect on platelets. Lastly, NSAIDs can also negatively affect kidney function in older adults.



Due to the risks associated with NSAIDs in older adults, stronger but safer pain medications are sometimes used when needed for management of chronic moderate to severe pain. When opioids are needed, close monitoring is required to ensure the benefits outweigh the risks. Other classes of medications such as anticonvulsants, are sometimes prescribed for neuropathic types of chronic pain. A thoughtful discussion with a healthcare provider is needed to find the best approach for each individual.

With or without the use of medication, a holistic approach is most comprehensive. Integrated therapies such as acupuncture/acupressure, massage, chiropractic consultation provide effective alternative methods to managing pain. Referrals to rehabilitation services including physical or occupational therapy can also be extremely effective.

Tapping into to the healing power of mind/body medicine through mindfulness-based health practices like yoga, meditation and Tai-Chi also have scientifically proven benefits in managing chronic pain.

This comprehensive approach goes beyond medication alone and can be extremely effective in improving quality of life through targeting individual goals. If you have chronic pain and feel you are not “living optimally,” talk with your healthcare provider about a plan that best suits your personal preferences.

HEALTH EDUCATION LECTURE

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Erin Fragola,
Outreach Coordinator**

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strength."*

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