



Helping people manage their pain

A fact sheet for people looking after friends, family and other loved ones who are living with pain.

You may need to seek assistance from a health-care professional when you have concerns about people you care for who are in pain.

Uncontrolled pain is a common problem. Pain can affect anyone at any age and include people who are unable to communicate that they are experiencing some form of pain. If people have pain during their day-to-day activities or during any medical procedure, this can affect the way they behave and function. This behaviour may cause you to feel helpless and distressed, especially if you can not help them with their pain and they are not able to speak for themselves.

The right to access the best pain management possible.

The Canadian Pain Society states that people have the right to receive the best possible pain management. If the person you care for has pain, there are many resources that can help. Nurses and other health-care professionals are available to help you find effective ways to assist the person you care for.

There are different ways to manage pain based on the type of pain (procedural pain, acute, persistent). Nurses and other health-care professionals use the following principles and they can help you understand about managing pain:

- Pain is unique and different for each person.
- Pain that continues after a treatment must be assessed by health-care professionals to identify the best possible way to manage the person's pain.
- People experiencing pain and their families need to be involved in decisions about the care and management of pain.
- A variety of health-care professionals may be involved in the assessment and management of pain, especially if the person's pain is complex.

When should you speak to a health-care professional?

Pain is often easier to control in the early stages before it becomes intense. If the person you care for is unable to communicate pain, you may be able to recognize the presence of pain through changes in behaviours such as being irritable, crying, grimacing, or becoming quiet. If you suspect the person you care for is experiencing pain but they are not able to communicate, inform a health-care professional.

The first steps when helping someone with pain:

You are key to helping health-care professionals identify if the person you care for is experiencing pain, especially if she or he cannot communicate. When health-care professionals ask about pain in the person you care for, be prepared to talk about the following:

- Behaviours:** Are there any behaviours in the person you care for that concern you? Have these behaviours changed? When did the behaviour change?
- Location:** Where do you think the person is feeling pain? Do you think the person's pain is affected by movement? Do you think he/she feels pain in more than one place?
- Description:** You will be asked if you know what may make the pain feel better or worse such as when he/she is resting or when they are moving around? Do you think the pain stops the person from doing day-to-day activities? Does it affect their sleep, mood or appetite?
- Duration and Frequency:** You may be asked if you know when the pain seems to start? How long does it last? How often it occurs?
- Intensity:** You may be asked to rate the person's pain. Some scales have numbers or words such as '0=no pain' to '10=worst pain' or pictures of faces to describe the intensity of pain, or if using a number scale such as 0-10, 0 is no pain, while 10 is the 'worst possible pain'. Pain scales are available for children and adults who cannot communicate. These scales describe behaviours you may have seen in the person to help measure the pain.
- Treatment:** You also will be asked what you do to help the person pain. Do you give any pain medication prescribed or not prescribed by a doctor or nurse practitioner? Do you give any herbal remedies or other types of medication not prescribed but bought from a store? You may be asked how long the person been taking them? What dose? How often? How well do they relieve the pain? You may also be asked if you have used heat, massage, relaxing music, or acupuncture to help the person with pain?
- Goals:** What do you think the person in pain would want to do to help manage their pain? ?

What happens next?

Your answers and the results from the physical exam and any tests will help the health-care professionals work with you to develop a plan to manage pain in the person you care for. The plan may include medication and other forms of treatment such as massage, physiotherapy, heat or cold therapy and strategies such as relaxation and distraction. You should be asked on a regular basis if you feel the person's pain is controlled or improving with the treatment, if you are not asked please do not hesitate to tell the health-care professionals caring for this person. This will help the nurses and health-care team know if the pain management plan is working or needs to be changed.

This information fact sheet is developed as a supplement to the RNAO Nursing Best Practice Guideline document for nurses. Its intent is to increase your knowledge and involvement in making decisions about the health of people you care for. The nursing best practice guideline, *Assessment and Management of Pain*, is available for public viewing and free download at <http://RNAO.ca/bpg>.