Medications and Chronic Pain

Effective pain management often combines medications and non-medication strategies tailored to individual needs. The choice of medication depends on factors such as pain type, severity, duration, allergies, and other chronic conditions.

For mild pain, over-the-counter options like ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) and acetaminophen (Tylenol®) are usually effective. For more complex chronic pain, healthcare providers may prescribe antidepressants (e.g., amitriptyline, duloxetine) or antiepileptics (e.g., gabapentin, pregabalin). Opioids, such as morphine or hydromorphone, are generally reserved for severe acute pain, like post-surgical or cancer-related pain, as they often lack long-term benefits for chronic conditions.

For optimal management, medications should be combined with strategies like psychological therapy (e.g., acceptance commitment therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy), physical activity, and self-care techniques. Collaborate with your healthcare provider to create a comprehensive pain management plan that includes non-medication strategies, such as pacing activities and taking breaks.

Don't Wait for Pain to Worsen

- Controlling pain early can prevent a cycle of stress and increased discomfort. Make the most of your pain medications: if you have regular prescriptions, take them on time. For as-needed medications, don't wait until the pain escalates.
- If you have multiple healthcare providers, designate one to oversee your pain management. Ensure that all your doctors are aware of your prescriptions to avoid potential complications.

Concerns About Addiction

Addiction occurs when individuals misuse medications for reasons other than pain relief, and it can happen with certain pain medications, like opioids. Discuss the risks and benefits of these medications with your healthcare provider. If you take opioids for an extended period, you might develop tolerance, meaning you'll need higher doses for the same effect. This is different from addiction.

Long-term use can also lead to physical dependence, where your body adapts to the medication. Abruptly stopping may result in withdrawal symptoms such as nausea,

diarrhea, vomiting, increased pain, irritability, or anxiety, but this does not equate to addiction.

Pain Medications and Constipation. Some pain medications, particularly opioids, can slow digestion and cause constipation. Be proactive in managing this side effect with your healthcare provider.

Tips to combat constipation.

- Increase your fluid intake.
- Increase your dietary fiber intake by eating more fruits (prunes) and vegetables. HealthLink BC constipation information: Constipation
- Talk to your health care provider about whether it is appropriate for you to use a stimulant laxative (for example, sennosides or bisacodyl) or other medications such as PEG 3350 (*Restoralax®, Lax-A-Day®*), lactulose or magnesium-containing medications.
- Docusate is not effective for opioid-induced constipation. Use *Metamucil* or other over-the-counter fiber supplements with caution. They may not help and may lead to blockage in your intestines if you aren't drinking enough liquids.

Pain medication safety

- Do not make any changes or stop taking any pain medication without first checking with your doctor or nurse practitioner. If a pain medication is not working to improve your pain, your doctor or nurse practitioner may change your dose or try another medication.
- Keep a current list of all your medications and bring it to your health care providers at every visit.
- Store pain medications in a safe place, out of reach and out of sight of children, teens and pets.
- Keep pain medicine in its original container so you do not take it by mistake.
- Do not share medications with others and do not borrow medications from a friend or relative.
- Dispose of unused or expired medications safely.
- Ask about a naloxone kit if you are taking opioid medications. Healthlink: Naloxone.
- Let your health care team know if you take any mind-altering substances including sleeping pills, alcohol, cannabis and illegal drugs.
- If you feel sleepy and/or dizzy, do not drive or work with machinery.

Resources

Pain B.C. - LivePlanBe: Medications – Variety of articles on Pain Medications from Pain BC.

Brainman stops his opioids (video) – A short 2 minute video on stopping Opioid medication.

Medications to treat pain – Learn about different types of Pain and treatment options.

Pain and role of medications – A quick video on the role of medications in Pain Management.

fraserhealth
Better health. Best in health care.