

# Pain Management in Palliative Care

This guide is to help you and your caregivers understand pain and learn ways to manage it. Pain can affect the body and may also impact sleep, mood and daily activities. Your care team wants to understand your full experience and help you feel as comfortable as possible.

## Acute and Chronic Pain

Pain may come and go, or it may stay with you every day. Pain can happen in cancer as well as in many other health conditions

- **Acute pain** starts suddenly and may last up to 3 months.
- **Chronic pain** lasts longer than 3 months.

## Your Care Team Wants to Know:

- What makes your pain better or worse?
- How would you describe your pain (sharp, dull, burning, aching)?
- Where do you feel pain? Does it stay in one spot or move to other areas?
- How would you rate your pain – from 0 = no pain to 10 = worst possible pain?

People with memory issues also experience pain. They may not be able to express their pain and it may look like:

- Breathing changes: faster breathing, working harder, or holding their breath
- Noises: moaning, groaning, crying
- Facial expressions: frowning, grimacing, looking scared, or sad
- Body language: restlessness, tensing or curling up, touching where they hurt
- Behaviour changes: irritable, unable to console

## Opioids: A key part of managing pain

Opioids (like morphine, hydromorphone, oxycodone, and fentanyl) are strong pain medicines. In palliative care, they are used carefully to help people feel more comfortable often in combination with other treatments such as acetaminophen (Tylenol™) and radiation. The healthcare team adjusts the dose to match each person’s needs. The goal is to manage pain, improve quality of life, and help people remain comfortable.

## Safety and Common Worries:

Many people worry about addiction or overdose. In palliative care, opioids are used safely and monitored by your care team. Your care team will ask about your health and family history to make sure the medicine is right for you. They start with low doses and check often to see whether the opioid is helping or needs adjusting.

## Possible Side Effects:

Opioids can commonly cause:

- Drowsiness, dizziness or confusion
- Nausea
- Dry mouth
- Constipation (very common)

Most side effects improve after the first few days. You will need to take regular medicine to prevent and treat constipation. Tell your care team if side effects do not get better.

*more information on other side →*

<b>Call 8-1-1</b> Healthlink BC www.healthlinkbc.ca	Nurse	24 hours a day	Daily	Call 8-1-1 to speak with a nurse, ask a dietitian about nutrition, or a pharmacist about your medication.
	Dietitian	9 a.m. – 5 p.m.	Mon – Fri	
	Pharmacist	5 p.m. – 9 a.m.	Daily	
	Hearing Impaired	Call 7-1-1		

# Pain Management in Palliative Care *(continued)*

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## Safety, Storage and Disposal:

- Take your medicine **exactly as prescribed** and **record it** on a medication form.
- Keep opioids in a **secure place** away from children, pets, or anyone who might misuse them.
- Use a pill organizer or clearly labeled bottles to stay organized.
- Consider asking for medication to be provided in **blister packs** at your pharmacy.
- Bring your medication list to appointments.
- Return unused or expired opioids to the pharmacy for safe disposal — **do not flush** them or throw them in the trash.

## Common Myths and Facts About Opioid Use

1. **“Opioids cause addiction”**  
When used for pain and taken as prescribed, addiction is very rare. Your body may get used to the medicine, but that’s not the same as addiction.
2. **“Opioids will make me die faster”**  
When taken as directed by your care team, opioids will not shorten your life. They help reduce pain and help you live more comfortably.
3. **“If I start opioids now, nothing will help later.”**  
Doses and medicines can be changed or added if your pain gets worse. You won’t run out of options.
4. **“Taking strong pain medicine means I’m giving up.”**  
Taking medicine helps you live better and enjoy time with others — it’s not about giving up.
5. **“Side effects will be too hard to handle.”**  
Side effects, such as constipation and nausea, are common. Your care team will help you manage them with medications.

## More Ways to Manage Pain:

**Mindfulness and Meditation:** These practices can help calm the mind and body. Try slow, deep breathing, short daily meditations, or gentle yoga to lower stress and anxiety.

**Guided Imagery:** This practice uses your imagination to help you feel better. You can imagine being in a calm place, writing about happy memories, or saying a daily gratitude statement.

**Complementary therapies:** Activities like music therapy, massage, physiotherapy and aromatherapy can help reduce pain and anxiety. You can listen to calming music, get a gentle massage, or relax while breathing deeply. Please talk with your care team before starting any new treatment.

**Support Groups & Self-Education:** Joining a support group or learning more about your illness can be useful and help you feel less alone and more in control.

**Comforting Environment:** Soft light, a warm blanket, a caring touch, and familiar items can make you feel safe and relaxed.

**Hot and Cold Therapy:** Warm or cold compresses can help ease pain by reducing swelling, relaxing muscles, and soothing sore spots.

**If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to your care team.**

Main Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Home and Community

Care contact phone: \_\_\_\_\_