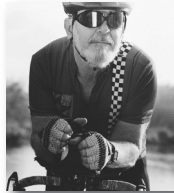
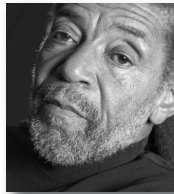


*A positive approach to pain management*

# Aging with Ease



# Take Care of Yourself, Take Control of Your Pain

For millions of Americans, living with pain can be, well, a real pain. Especially for those of us who are older and more likely to have illnesses like arthritis, diabetes, or cancer. Luckily, there are safe and effective ways to manage pain. The key is learning more about it, and knowing when to ask for help from a health care professional.

This booklet gives you a brief overview of how to recognize, understand, and safely treat your pain. It provides the latest information, including advice from the American Geriatrics Society's 2009 guidelines for controlling persistent pain in older people.

## Recognizing Pain

Aches and pains are not a normal part of growing older. They are your body's way of telling you that there may be something wrong. Experts generally define pain in two ways:

- **Everyday pain** can be caused by a variety of things, including poor posture, muscle strains and sprains, tendonitis, bursitis, tooth and gum disease, sore feet, or symptoms of minor illnesses like colds and the flu.
- **Persistent pain** occurs either continuously or on and off for a month or more. It is usually the result of long-term diseases or conditions; two of the most common causes of persistent pain are arthritis and diabetes.



## A Healthy Lifestyle for Less Pain

It is possible to limit how often you feel pain and its severity by making some healthy lifestyle choices. An ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure:

- Exercise regularly to maintain strength, coordination, balance, endurance, and flexibility.
- Don't overdo it.
- Eat a well balanced diet that includes plenty of fiber.
- Drink up to eight glasses of water a day, unless advised by a health care provider to limit fluids.
- Get enough sleep.
- Stand, sit, and walk with good posture.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.

## When to Seek Medical Help

Although older adults are more likely to experience pain, they are also less likely to report it to their health care provider than younger people. It is important to recognize and admit when you are feeling pain and to seek treatment.

### It is probably okay for you to treat pain yourself when:

- You know the cause of the pain.
- The pain is not the result of a serious injury.
- The pain is mild to moderate in intensity and feels better after you try methods of pain relief (for example, warm baths, relaxation, or adjusting physical activity) or use recommended doses of non-prescription pain relievers.
- The pain gets better as time passes.

### Call your health care provider or clinic if:

- You believe the pain might be a sign of a heart attack, stroke, or similar medical emergency.
- The pain is severe.

- The pain lasts for more than four days, even after you've rested and tried self-treatments and recommended doses of over-the-counter pain relievers.
- You have an infection. (Symptoms of an infection include redness, swelling, and warmth in the painful area.)
- You have had a recent fall or injury.
- You have a change in sensation, like experiencing numbness.
- You have a history of cancer.

### ***Pain Checklist***

If you have determined that you want to see a health care provider about your pain, try to put your thoughts in order so that you can accurately describe what you are experiencing. A clear description is essential for proper diagnosis and treatment. It will help to have the answers to these questions when you go to your appointment:

- Exactly where does it hurt?
- Have you had similar pain in the past?
- Is the pain sharp, dull, aching, or burning, or does it have some other characteristic?
- Is the pain constant or does it come and go?
- What makes the pain better, what makes the pain worse?
- Are you able to sleep through the night or does the pain interfere?
- Does the pain get worse when you do a certain activity or type of exercise?
- How much does the pain interrupt your daily activities, such as bathing, eating, dressing, and getting around?
- How often does the pain interfere with your ability to think clearly, your appetite, energy, mood, or relationships with other people?
- How many days over the past week have you been unable to do what you want to do because of your pain?
- Is there an obvious reason for the pain, such as a sprained ankle or an arthritic joint?

### ***Common Treatment Options***

The next section briefly describes typical treatment options you can try on your own or that your health care provider may prescribe for you. As with all medications, when treating yourself it's important to be informed and ask your pharmacist or health care provider any questions. Always tell your health care provider all the medications and herbal or supplemental products you are taking, as there may be interactions that are not listed on the product's packaging.

Most mild, day-to-day pain responds well to simple treatments. Your health care provider may recommend short periods of rest and limited activity. If that does not help the pain, they then may recommend medication. If your pain is moderate or severe, your health care provider will most likely recommend one or a combination of treatments described in this section.

### ***Over-the-Counter Medications***

Over-the-counter medications (OTCs), available without a prescription, can be effective for mild to moderate pain. Although they are sold without a prescription, they should be taken with caution. Use the "Steps for Safer Medication Use" as a guide to make sure you're taking your medications safely. Always tell your health care provider what you're taking and exactly how much.

#### **Acetaminophen**

The American Geriatrics Society recommends acetaminophen as the first medication to relieve mild to moderate muscle and joint pain. It is effective and safe as long as you do not exceed the recommended daily amount.

Keep in mind that many products contain acetaminophen; read product labels to make sure your total dose (amount) from all medications you are taking is no more than 4,000 mg (4 g) per day.

Compared to other OTC pain relievers, acetaminophen has fewer side effects. However, it is important to always have a clear line of communication between you and your health care provider. Always ask to make sure acetaminophen is a medication you should be taking. If you drink three or more

alcoholic beverages a day, are older and more frail, or have chronic health problems you may have an increased risk of liver damage when taking more than the recommended dose. Your health care provider will most likely reduce your maximum dose to 50-75% of the normal recommended dose, or recommend another type of pain reliever.

### NSAIDs

NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) like aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen sodium are an effective form of short-term pain relief. Experts, however, recommend that older adults should not use these medications for long peri-

ods of time, and those with certain conditions, such as heart disease or stomach bleeding, should be carefully monitored by their health care provider while taking these medications.

These medications can harm the lining of the stomach, which tends to become more fragile with age and can cause ulcers and bleeding. If you have any questions about whether you should be taking NSAIDs, especially if you are over 50, talk with your health care provider first. Do not take NSAIDs before talking with your health care provider if you take a blood thinner such as warfarin, if you drink more than three alcoholic beverages a day, or if you have kidney problems or peptic ulcers.

## Steps for Safer Medication Use

- 1. Keep a current list of all your medications.** The first step to keeping yourself safe is to keep an up-to-date list of all the medications you are taking. This list will be helpful for you, your health care provider and your pharmacist in evaluating dosage and possible interactions.
- 2. Read the label.** All over-the-counter (OTC) medications are required to have labels similar to the Nutrition Facts labels you find on foods in the grocery store. Use these labels to compare ingredients and dosages, understand how and when the medication should be used, and learn about possible harmful effects. Those listed as *active ingredients* cause the drug to have an effect. These are listed using the generic name, such as acetaminophen and not the brand name. It is important for you to know the generic name of the OTC medications you are taking. Be sure to read the label thoroughly before taking any medication.
- 3. Check for medication interactions.** Before taking an OTC medication, herbal or food supplement, talk to your health care provider or pharmacist to make sure it will not affect the effectiveness of the prescription medications you are taking for other conditions.
- 4. Avoid pain medications that may worsen a health condition.** Even if there is not a warning listed on an OTC medication label to avoid it because of a health condition you have, double-check with your pharmacist or health care provider.
- 5. Be alert to signs of adverse side effects.** Even though side effects are rare for some medications, they may still occur. If you notice anything out of the ordinary such as rashes, nausea, or gastrointestinal (stomach) problems contact your health care provider immediately. Many common side effects can be managed.
- 6. Take pain medication exactly as the package tells you, unless specifically directed to do otherwise by your health care provider.** If you are unsure about any of the instructions on the product's packaging, ask your health care provider or pharmacist to explain it to you. Do not take more than the recommended daily amount listed on the label unless specifically directed to by your health care provider.
- 7. Total your dosage among all medications to avoid accidental overdose.** Some products combine different types of medications in the same pill or liquid. If you do not read the label carefully, you may miss an ingredient and accidentally take more than is recommended. Become familiar with the generic name(s) of these medications and always ask your pharmacist or health care provider if you are unsure about the contents of an OTC product.



## Prescription Medications

Pain that is moderate or severe or lasts for more than a few days may require treatment with prescription medication.

### Opioid Analgesics

Opioids, like morphine or codeine, may help relieve moderate to severe pain when other medications cannot. In general, these medications cause fewer serious side effects than traditional NSAIDs. Research has found that addiction to these medications is rare among older adults and can be tremendously effective in relieving pain when properly managed. If your health care provider believes that a trial of opioids may be helpful for you, she/he will discuss the side effects with you and how they can be managed.

### Adjuvant Medications

Other medications, now referred to as adjuvant medications, that were originally created for a purpose other than managing pain have been found to be effective in relieving pain in some people. A few antidepressant medications have been found to relieve pain, even when a person is not depressed. Some anticonvulsants have been found to relieve pain also. Anesthetics that are available in patch form have been found to relieve localized pain when the pain is caused by nerve injuries or diseases.



## Treatment Without Medication

There are many safe and effective ways to relieve pain without using medication. Sometimes these techniques are used in combination with drug treatments. Many can be done at home; others require the help of a health care professional. Remember to talk to your health care provider about any pain relief techniques you're using or plan to use. Educating yourself and keeping up-to-date with your treatment regimes has been shown to reduce anxiety and depression, and helps build self-reliance and control over your pain.

Here are some methods of pain relief you can try at home, after you have had some basic instruction from a trained health care professional:

### Cold Packs

Cold packs can be applied to the painful area for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. Always wrap cold packs in a protective layer like a towel. Decrease the application time if you experience discomfort or notice a change in the color of your skin.



In the case of sprains, apply a cold pack as soon as possible to keep swelling down. Swelling itself can be a source of pain. For arthritic pain, cold compresses may be useful for reducing pain when there is warmth, redness, or swelling. Cold packs also work well as the first treatment for muscle strains, backaches, some toothaches, and some headaches.

### Heat

Heat is often effective in providing relief for pain that lasts longer than a day or two. Warm, moist heat packs work well for muscle, joint, and back pain. Make sure the heat is only warm and not hot enough to burn the skin.

Warmth is the most effective way to increase mobility and relieve stiffness in arthritic joints, but it can increase swelling and fluid in the joint. Alternating heat and cold is ultimately more effective than using cold or heat alone. (Never apply heat to your feet if you have diabetes or circulation problems.)

## Exercise

Physical activity can help relieve headaches, decrease depression, prevent low back pain, and increase the range of motion of arthritic joints. The activity does not have to be strenuous, and does not have to include a trip to the gym.

Ask your health care provider what type of exercise is best for you. It does not have to be long or intense for you to see benefits—exercise regularly and you will see benefits.

Stretching, as long as you ask your health care provider first, can greatly decrease pain related to stiff joints and muscles. Regular physical activity has also been found to keep your heart and circulatory system strong, and have many positive effects on your mental health.

## Physical or Occupational Therapy

Physical therapists may use massage, exercise, cold or heat to help relieve pain. Occupational therapists can help you modify or avoid situations that cause pain and find ways to prevent pain from interrupting your life.



Take Care  
of Yourself,  
Take Control  
of Your Pain

## Other Sources of Help

### American Chronic Pain Association

P.O. Box 850  
Rocklin, California 95677  
1.800.533.3231  
[www.theACPA.org](http://www.theACPA.org)

### American Geriatrics Society/ The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging

Empire State Building  
350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 801  
New York, New York 10118  
1.800.563.4916  
[www.healthinaging.org](http://www.healthinaging.org)

### American Occupational Therapy Association

4720 Montgomery Lane  
P.O. Box 31220  
Bethesda, Maryland 20824-  
1220  
301.652.2682  
[www.AOTA.org](http://www.AOTA.org)

### American Pain Foundation

201 North Charles Street  
Suite 710  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201-  
4111  
1.888.615.7246  
[www.painfoundation.org](http://www.painfoundation.org)

### American Physical Therapy Association

1111 North Fairfax Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314-1488  
1.800.999.2782  
[www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)

### Arthritis Foundation

P.O. Box 7669  
Atlanta, Georgia 30357-0669  
1.800.283.7800  
[www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)

### National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Information Clearinghouse

National Institutes of Health  
1 AMS Circle  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892-  
3675  
1.877.226.4267 (toll free)  
[www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)

### National Council on Patient Information and Education

4915 Saint Elmo Avenue  
Suite 505  
Bethesda, Maryland 20814-  
6082  
301.656.8565  
[www.talkaboutrx.org](http://www.talkaboutrx.org)

### National Headache Foundation

820 North Orleans  
Suite 217  
Chicago, Illinois 60610  
1.888.643.5552  
[www.headaches.org](http://www.headaches.org)



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[www.agingresearch.org](http://www.agingresearch.org)

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