

Pain



"Some days the pain got worse and other days I felt better. It could really vary. What worried me was not knowing what it meant or what to do about it."

Kara
Diagnosed with breast cancer

What is cancer-related pain?

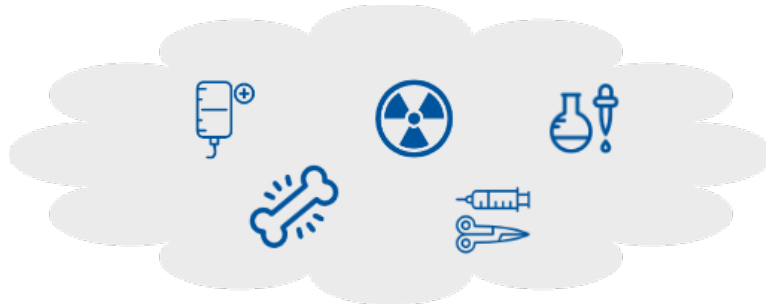
Cancer-related pain is pain that results from the cancer itself or from tests, procedures, or treatments connected to the cancer. It is common to experience some pain when you are in cancer treatment. More than half of people with cancer will have pain at some point during their experience. When you are in pain it might make you feel worried, upset or frustrated.

There are different types of pain:

- **Acute pain.** This kind of pain doesn't last very long and is usually easy to control with medication. This is the sort of pain you might feel after a biopsy or an operation.
- **Chronic pain.** This pain tends to be constant and last longer (how long depends on the cause). For example, you might feel this pain if there is a tumour pressing on a nerve in your body or if chemotherapy caused damage to your nerves.
- **Breakthrough pain.** This kind of pain occurs when pain "breaks through" between doses of pain medication—in other words, your pain returns before you are scheduled to take your next dose of pain medication, which generally controls your pain well.

How does it affect me? Because everyone feels and copes with pain differently, pain can affect each person in different ways. Pain can interfere with your daily activities (e.g., working, cooking). And can also affect your outlook on life, your feelings about yourself and your state of health.

Does it get better with time? Pain relief is an important part of your cancer treatment and your overall health care. Most pain can be controlled and will be more easily controlled if taken care of when it begins. In fact, – the worse the pain gets, the harder it is to get under control. The good news is that there are many effective ways—from medication to meditation—to relieve pain. You might have to try several different options before you find the approach that works best for you. (See [What can I do to help manage my pain?](#))



What causes pain?

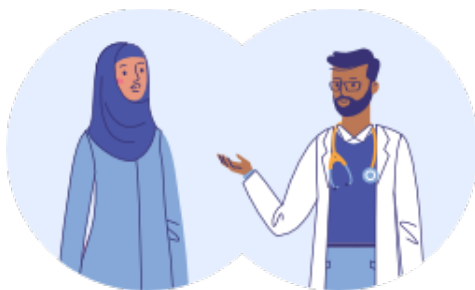
Causes may include some of the following:

- The cancer itself, such as a tumour pressing on bones, nerves, or other organs in your body.
- Tests or procedures, such as a biopsy or surgery.
- Cancer treatment effects from chemotherapy (e.g., nerve damage, bone pain) or radiotherapy (e.g., skin and mucous membrane irritation, inflammation).



What are the signs of pain?

Because pain can have different causes, you may experience different kinds of pain at different times in your illness. Patients have described the sensation of pain in many different ways. These can include words like throbbing, aching, sharp, burning, shooting, tingling, stabbing, dull or deep.



When should I get help for my pain?

Regardless of the cause for pain, you do not have to accept pain as a normal part of living with cancer. Pain does not make the treatment more “effective”. Let your oncologist, nurse, or pharmacist know if you’re hurting or if your pain medication is not working well (for more information see [Talking to your healthcare professional about your symptoms or concerns](#)). Talk to them if you have trouble with any of the following:

- You start to feel pain before it is time to take your next dose of medication.
- You have questions about your pain. For example: Is my pain normal? Should my pain last this long?
- Your pain is interfering with your daily activities, including sleeping.
- Your pain is affecting your mood.



Talk to someone in your healthcare team immediately if:

- You have pain that is not going away or is getting worse
- You have a new pain that you have not had before
- You have a new feeling of numbness or tingling in your fingers or hands and/or toes or feet
- You have pain with fever

Call 911 or go to the Emergency department if:

- You feel pain in your chest or back when you take a deep breath
- You have a sudden leg weakness, especially if you have back pain
- You lose bladder (pee) or bowel (poo) control

What can I do to help manage my pain?

There are many ways to help you improve pain. If needed, your doctor will prescribe a pain medication for you (see [Medication](#)). In addition to medication, there are a number of strategies to help improve your pain and to help you cope with it better.



Keep a pain diary

It can be hard to explain your pain to someone. Only you know what your pain feels like and how it affects you. Keeping a record of the details of your pain will help your healthcare team to find ways to control your pain. This will help them understand your pain and how to treat it. Keep track of the following details in your diary.

- Where do you feel the pain?
- When did your pain start?
- What were you doing when the pain started?
- What does it feel like: aching, throbbing, stabbing, burning, tingling?
- How long does the pain last?
- Is there anything you do that makes it feel better? Worse?
- Does the pain interfere with doing your daily activities, sleep or anything else you want to do?
- When you feel pain, rate it on a scale of 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst possible pain).
- If you take pain medication, write down how soon it takes affect and how long it lasts
- For more information see [Symptom diary](#).



Medication

Medication is often an important part of managing pain.

- Don't hesitate to ask your pharmacist for advice or more information.
- Try to take your medication on schedule, even if you are not feeling pain at that moment. This will help you avoid intense pain.



Try to stay active

It is generally fine to exercise during treatment but check with your healthcare team before starting any exercise.

- Start slowly and go at your own pace.
- Regular exercise can improve your sleep, which may help you cope with pain better.
- Even small amounts of activity, like walking to the end of the driveway or up and down your hallway, can help with pain.
- For more information see [Get Moving](#).



Consider physical therapy

- **Massage therapy.** This kind of therapy can ease tight, stiff muscles and reduce pain. Your family and friends can help massage painful muscles or you can consult a certified massage therapist who has experience working with cancer patients.
- **TENS.** This stands for transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation. The TENS machine stimulates the nerves through a small electrical charge sent to pads that stick on your skin. It causes a tingling feeling and it temporarily blocks the nerves carrying pain messages to your brain.
- **Heat and cold therapy.** Heat and/or ice may not be safe if you are having radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or if you have numbness from nerve damage. Check with your healthcare team before using these therapies.
 - Hot moist towels, commercial heat packs, warm baths, or heated pools can help to relax stiff muscles and ease pain. Always check the temperature first and make sure it is not too hot to avoid injuring your skin.
 - Cold compresses can numb pain, reduce swelling and bruising, and ease muscle spasms. You can prepare a cold compress from ice in a bag or use a packet of frozen vegetables. Wrap the cold compress in a towel and do not apply it for more than 5 to 10 minutes at a time.



Practice relaxation strategies

Stress and anxiety can make pain feel worse. Relaxation strategies are a useful way to help relax your mind and body, and reduce anxiety. The good thing about these techniques is that they can be done almost anywhere.

- **Breathing exercises.** This technique focuses on slow, deep breathing. Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help you relax and take your mind off your pain.
- **Guided imagery or visualization.** This strategy helps you imagine yourself being in a place or setting that makes you feel calm and at ease in real life. Guided means someone talks you through the process in person or through a recording.
- **Meditation.** Meditation is a practice of quieting the mind, usually by focusing attention on breathing. You can meditate sitting, lying down and even walking.
- **Massage therapy.** Seek help from a certified massage therapist who has experience working with cancer patients.
- **Yoga and Tai Chi.** Yoga (some types) and tai chi involve slow, meditative movements that help relax the mind and body. Look for classes with trained instructors so that you learn the proper techniques.
- For more information see [Relaxation Strategies](#).



Important information about cannabis

Some patients do use cannabis to reduce pain, help with relaxation or as a sleeping aid. However, the research is still unclear about the use of cannabis to manage cancer-related symptoms, including pain. It is important to talk to your doctor before trying cannabis. For more information on what cancer patients should know about cannabis, go to: <https://www.bccancer.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/medical-cannabis>.

Resources

For more information on cancer-related pain, self-management strategies and support organizations, check out the resources below.

[BC Cancer Agency – Symptom Management: Pain](#)

[BC Cancer – Pain from Cancer](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Pain Relief: A guide for people with cancer](#)

[Cancer Care Ontario – How to Manage Your Pain](#) (download patient guide)

Acknowledgement of sources

- BC Cancer Agency. Symptom Management: Pain. 2016.
- BC Cancer. Pain from Cancer. 2020.
- BC Cancer Agency. Symptom Management Guidelines: Pain. 2013.
- COSTaRS. Pain. 2020.
- Cancer Care Ontario. How to Manage Your Pain. 2016.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Pain Relief: A guide for people with cancer. 2015.
- Coping Together. Getting on Top of Symptoms—Pain. 2013.
- Prostate Cancer Canada. TEMPO: Pain

Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

Disclaimer

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health, or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice, or disregard professional medical advice, because of information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property

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