

Key Information to Share with Your Doctor When You Have New Pain

It's important to share information with your doctor. Talking to your doctor about your pain helps you engage in shared decision making regarding how to treat it. The doctor can also ensure that whatever treatment used to treat your pain is safe and effective. Your doctor can also help you monitor your response to pain therapy and adjust if necessary.

Keep a Pain Diary

This is important, as it helps provide information about any patterns of pain. Some patients who have arthritis have a lot of pain and stiffness in the morning for about 30 minutes to 1 hour. This information can be key to helping your doctor know what kind of pain you're experiencing and how to treat it moving forward. Tracking your pain levels can help provide context when you speak to your doctor. If you don't have pain on the day of your appointment, the log can help show that the pain is still a problem.

Find Good Words to Describe Your Pain

Is it sharp? Dull? Burning? Aching? Tingling? Stabbing? These different descriptions help characterize what kind of pain you might be experiencing. Sharp pain could indicate some sort of internal inflammation or swelling. Dull pain might mean you've had this type of pain for a long time. Some people might have dull pain from old injuries. Aching pain could be because of pain in the muscles. Some people experience aching pain when they have a cold or the flu. Tingling and stabbing pain could indicate pain in the nerves.

Where is the Pain?

What part of your body is the pain most prominent? Does it feel like pain in the muscle, nerves, or joints? Describing where the pain is and what it feels like will help your doctor make the best decision about how to take care of you moving forward. Where the pain is located can help with deciding between topical and oral options. For example, for back pain, you can try a topical option like an over-the-counter lidocaine patch before deciding to try oral medications.

Is the Pain on One Side of Your Body or Both Sides?

Some types of pain are on one side of the body versus both sides. A good example is people who have rheumatoid arthritis (RA), who have pain in their joints on both sides of their body. People who have osteoarthritis experience pain in their joints differently than people who have RA, usually feeling pain in their joints on one side of their body not both sides. Osteoarthritis and RA are different in that osteoarthritis is pain in the joints caused by normal wear and tear of the cartilage that protects the bones in your joints, while in RA, the immune system gets confused and attacks the joints.

How Does the Pain Affect Your Daily Life?

Does it interfere with getting out of bed? Getting dressed? Feeling fatigued? This helps your doctor understand the severity of the pain. In an earlier module, we talked about the pain scale. The pain scale is a more objective way to measure your pain levels. Talking about how pain affects your life is a subjective way to understand the severity of pain. If the pain is so severe that you can't get out of bed and do normal activities of living like you did before, it could indicate that the pain needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

What's the History of Your Pain?

How long have you had this pain? If you've had this pain before, let your doctor know! Also let your doctor know what you've tried to treat the pain before. What worked and what didn't work? Have you received treatment for the pain before? This is important because it makes sure your doctor doesn't suggest you use anything that hasn't worked for you in the past. If something you tried before worked a little bit, maybe we just need to adjust the dose this time to make it more effective.

Key Questions to Ask Your Doctor When You Have New Pain

What Are the Treatment Options?

There are so many treatment options available for pain. What your doctor might recommend for pain depends on what type of pain, where the pain is located, and how long you've had this pain.

What Are the Treatment Options besides Medications?

Ask about self-care options that can supplement medications like physical therapy, acupuncture, and therapeutic massage.