



TALKING TO YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER ABOUT PAIN

How To Describe What's Going On

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Talking to a healthcare professional about pain you are experiencing can seem like a daunting task. So daunting in fact, that studies have found that 25% of women and 14.6% of men under-report their pain in doctor's office settings¹. Some believe that it is just a part of Parkinson disease, aging, or life in general and that they should just tough it out. Some feel guilty for "complaining" or taking up too much of their health provider's time. While others fear being labeled as "drug seekers" or being told their pain is not serious. Which leads to the next point. Unfortunately, there can also be a high prevalence of underestimation or invalidation of a person's pain by healthcare professionals. With women and people from racialized groups less likely to have their pain believed¹. This can lead to disparities in pain treatment. To be fair, this does NOT mean your healthcare provider isn't on your side. Your healthcare provider wants to do what they can to help you live pain free so you can have the best possible quality of life – but they can't help you unless they know what is going on.

So, what can YOU do to ensure you are advocating for yourself or your loved one when it comes to reporting pain? The following are some questions to ask yourself (or your loved one) and actions to consider so you can be prepared to discuss with your healthcare provider. Thinking about them ahead of time and even writing down your answers can help make this discussion more effective.

Where does it hurt?

A good rule of thumb here is to be as specific as possible. For example, don't just say "my back"; instead, be as specific as possible and say "my lower back and into my right hip." Showing your healthcare provider where your pain is by either pointing or indicating on a diagram can also be helpful. If your pain moves around, be sure to state all the areas that are painful and note which ones bring the most pain.

What does the pain feel like?

This question is less about intensity and more about describing the pain sensation(s) you are experiencing. Is it a burning, tingling or stabbing sensation? Is it a dull ache or a throbbing pain? Is it a cramping or a tightness? Metaphors can also help, for example "it feels like an elephant is sitting on my chest."

Descriptive words can often offer more help to a healthcare provider because certain conditions or injuries have a very specific feeling associated with them.

How is the pain affecting your day-to-day activities?

Explain how the pain you are experiencing is affecting "normal" activities. For example, are you having trouble doing regular chores around the house or walking the dog? Have you canceled plans or not engaged in favorite activities because of the pain? Describing how the pain prevents you from doing certain activities. "I can't sit for more than 20 minutes." "I cannot sleep through the night." "It burns when I pee."

How intense is the pain?

Providing an accurate personal assessment of the intensity of your pain can help your healthcare provider understand what you are experiencing. An, while downplaying your pain is not beneficial, neither is overstating. The handy chart (Wong-Baker Faces® Pain Rating Scale) on the facing page can help you better determine and articulate the intensity of your pain.

What is the timing of your pain?

Have you been experiencing the pain for a day? A week? A couple months? How long does your pain last? Does it come and go every couple of hours or days? Is it steady throughout the day, but feels more intense in the mornings?

Your answer to these questions can help your healthcare provider determine if your pain is paroxysmal (comes on suddenly and sporadically, and leaves in the same manner) or chronic

(comes on more slowly and remains present for a long time before fading away or lessening).

Does anything help or worsen the pain?

Be sure to let your healthcare provider know what you have tried to help alleviate the pain. For example, rest, ice, heat, over-the-counter pain reliever, etc. Sharing what makes the pain worse is also helpful, for example “it’s painful to the touch,” or “bright lights make it worse,” or even stress.

Doing everything in your power to explain your pain clearly and accurately gives you the best chances of being heard and getting the help you need to manage your pain. ■

References

1Brandon L. Boring, Brandon W. Ng, Namrata Nanavaty, Vani A. Mathur, Over-Rating Pain is Overrated: A Fundamental Self-Other Bias in Pain Reporting Behavior, The Journal of Pain, Volume 23, Issue 10, 2022, Pages 1779-1789, ISSN 1526-5900, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpain.2022.06.002>.



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