

## Training Your Caregiver: Pain Management

For anyone involved with the long-term care of an older or infirm veteran, understanding how to provide pain management is a vital skill. Everyone has the right to live without pain, if it is possible to do so, and has the right to receive appropriate pain management. As a homecare worker, you play a role in identifying pain and understanding what can be done to treat it.

A variety of factors affect recognition, assessment, and management of pain. Likewise, many factors affect the presence, intensity, and ability to describe pain. Not all veterans will talk about their pain and others may lack the ability to do so. It will be up to you to notice a grimace, a rapid heartbeat, or sighing. It is critical to understand these nonverbal cues in order to respond appropriately. Medication, massage, compresses, or just listening to the veteran can reduce pain.

Unrelieved pain has many significant physical and psychological consequences. It interferes with the veteran's optimal level of function and self-care. It contributes to immobility, increasing the risk of skin breakdown, contractures, behavior problems, depression, and many other complications.

This module will guide you through proper pain management and address the types of pain that your veteran may experience.

The following conversations were overheard while taking care of a veteran. Each one demonstrates a misunderstanding about pain. Can you identify the problem or perhaps suggest a better way to think and talk about pain? Don't worry if you don't recognize the problem, because in this module you will learn about pain and how to deal with it in your work with veterans.

### **Scenario One:**

Jane Veteran: "My hands are really hurting today. The medicine the doctor gave me doesn't help very much."

Homecare worker: "I know how you feel. I have arthritis in my knees and they hurt sometimes with all the walking I do. I guess it gets worse the older you get, so we might as well get used to it and not complain about it."

**Scenario Two:**

Homecare Worker Mary: "That Mr. Garrett is always complaining about his pain. He takes too much of his pain medication. If you ask me, I think he is addicted to it."

Homecare Worker Alex: "You are probably right. Anyway, I don't think that he really hurts that bad. He is just lonely and wants some attention."

**Scenario Three:**

Homecare Worker Sue: "Poor Mr. Howard. He is so confused, he doesn't even recognize his own daughter sometimes."

Homecare Worker Jerry: "Well, one good thing, at least he doesn't complain about anything. Even when he fell and hurt his leg, he didn't ever say it bothered him. I heard that when your mind goes you don't feel pain."

**Scenario Four:**

Homecare Worker Judy: "Good morning, Mrs. Moore. How are you feeling today?"

Mrs. Moore: "As an old Army nurse, I don't like to complain."

Homecare Worker Judy: "Is something wrong?"

Mrs. Moore: "Yes. My back is killing me and it hurts to walk but please don't tell anyone. If my daughter or my doctor hear about it, they will just start doing a lot of painful tests on me and put me into a nursing home. Just help me get up and I'll be okay."

Homecare Worker Judy: "Okay, I won't tell a soul! Here, let me help you up."

**Common misconceptions about pain:**

Veterans and their workers may think that:

- Pain is a sign of aging.
- Nothing can be done for some kinds of pain.
- Pain is a punishment for past actions.
- Pain is a sign of a serious illness or a sign of impending death.

- Complaining about pain is a sign of weakness.
- Complaining about pain will lead to unpleasant medical testing.
- Complaints of pain will result in losing one's independence.
- Elderly and disabled people have a higher pain tolerance.
- People who complain of pain are just trying to get attention.
- Elderly and disabled veterans are likely to get addicted to pain medications.

All of these ideas are wrong. Pain is a sign that something is wrong with our bodies and it doesn't occur just because we get older. Healthy older people should not have pain. If something hurts, a physician should investigate to determine whether the pain is caused by a treatable condition.

Everyone has a right to live without pain, if it is possible to do so, and has the right to receive pain management when necessary. No one should suffer unnecessarily when treatment or relief is available.

If the pain caused by a condition cannot be improved with treatment, then the doctor should prescribe medications that allow the person to live without constant pain.

### **Pain: The Fifth Vital Sign**

Pain is defined as an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience; however, it is important to realize that with pain, it is whatever the person experiencing it says it is, and exists where the person says it does.

To find out whether a person is healthy or not, we often check the four major vital signs: blood pressure, temperature, pulse, and respirations. In addition, we should check to determine whether the person is experiencing any pain. This is now being called "the fifth vital sign" because we know that the presence of pain is an indication of a health problem that should be investigated. When a veteran tells you that he/she is having pain, you should always report this to family members or to the veteran's medical team (VA physician, Physician Assistant or the VA Team nurse).

In addition, we must remember that only the veteran really knows how he/she is feeling or how much pain he/she is experiencing. The person having the pain is the only expert on this subject. No one else

has the right to make a judgement about the type or amount of pain the individual has. We must always believe a person's self-report of pain.

### How do you know if someone is in pain and can't or won't tell you?

Watch for these nonverbal signs of pain:

- Guarded movements.
- Facial grimacing.
- Rapid heartbeat.
- Rapid breathing.
- Sadness or depression.
- Elevated blood pressure.
- Restlessness or sleeplessness.
- Moaning, groaning, or sighing.
- Bracing, or tensing the muscles.

Any of these symptoms should be reported to a family member or a member of the VA medical team (Physician, Physician Assistant, or team nurse).

### Types of Pain

**Acute pain** is severe and usually signals an injury or illness that must be treated. Kidney stones and heart attacks cause acute pain. When the cause of the pain is cured, the pain goes away. Acute pain can be a symptom of serious problems that require emergency treatment. Acute pain is generally too intense to ignore and will often cause people to clutch the part of the body that is in pain. This type of pain indicates that medical attention is needed.

**Chronic Pain** is persistent, ongoing pain that lasts for weeks, months, and yes, even years. Sometimes the pain was originally caused by an injury or illness that was cured, but for unknown reasons, the pain continues. There may be an incurable disease causing the pain, such as cancer. Chronic pain can even

occur without any known injury or illness causing it. The best that can be done in these situations is to treat the pain, without curing the underlying disease.

Chronic pain is not always constant or continuous but can come and go. An example of this is Fibromyalgia. Sometimes chronic pain becomes very sharp and severe for a time and then subsides. It can be very disabling to live with chronic pain, because the pain makes it too painful or tiring to perform everyday activities.

Chronic pain is caused when the nervous system keeps sending pain signals repeatedly. It can cause a loss of appetite, depression, irritability, and sleeplessness. Chronic pain sufferers get caught in a vicious cycle of exhaustion and depression that can make the pain worse. New medications and treatments make it possible to relieve even the most severe pain. No one today has to live with untreated chronic pain.

### **Major types of chronic pain**

The following are some of the most common kinds of chronic pain. Each has a variety of causes:

- Headache.
- Low back Pain.
- Cancer pain.
- Arthritis pain.
- Angina – the chest pain caused by restricted blood flow to the heart.
- Neurogenic pain – This kind of pain comes from the nerve tissues and includes such painful conditions as trigeminal neuralgia, a disease that causes severe pain in the face.
- Psychogenic pain – this kind of pain is not due to any known disease or injury but seems to come from the brain or mind.
- Persistent Pain – This type defines pain that lasts for a prolonged period of time (usually 3-6 months) and is associated with chronic disease or injury. Persistent pain is not always time-dependent but can be characterized as pain that lasts longer than the anticipated healing time. Autonomic activity is usually absent, but persistent pain is often associated with functional

loss, mood disruptions, behavior changes, and reduced quality of life; one example of persistent pain is osteoarthritis.

- Nociceptive pain – this type of pain refers to pain caused by stimulation of specific peripheral or visceral pain receptors. It results from disease process (e.g. osteoarthritis), soft-tissue injuries (e.g. falls), and medical treatment (e.g. surgery, venipuncture, etc). It is usually localized and responsive to treatment.
- Neuropathic pain – this type of pain refers to pain caused by damage to the peripheral or central nervous system. This type of pain is associated with diabetic neuropathies, post herpetic and trigeminal neuralgias, stroke, and chemotherapy treatment for cancer. It is usually more diffused and less responsive to analgesic medications.

### **Major types of pain management**

**Medication** prescribed by a physician is the best treatment for pain. There are also non-drug treatments that caregivers can use.

**Mild exercise** helps to increase flexibility and strength, relieving muscle stress that can cause back aches, headaches, and fatigue. Exercising in warm water is particularly good for arthritis sufferers, because the water relaxes and supports the muscles, making exercises easier to perform.

**Warm or cool compresses** applied to a painful area can bring temporary relief for headache, back ache, and arthritis.

**Massage** is useful for back pain, but any painful area that is red or swollen should not be massaged until a doctor has evaluated the problem.

**Sympathetic listening ear and a caring attitude** are sometimes the best medicine for people with chronic pain.

***Exam Follows on Next Page***



## Training Your Caregiver: Pain Management

Employee Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

For questions 1 – 5, fill in the blank using the following answer options:

**Mild Exercise**

**Guarded Movements**

**Chronic Pain**

**Acute Pain**

**Arthritis**

1. This kind of pain is severe and goes away when the underlying problem is cured:  
\_\_\_\_\_.
2. This is a nonverbal sign of pain that should be reported to a nurse or doctor:  
\_\_\_\_\_.
3. This is a common type of Chronic Pain: \_\_\_\_\_.
4. This can be a helpful treatment for back pain, headaches, and arthritis:  
\_\_\_\_\_.
5. This kind of pain is persistent, ongoing and sometimes occurs without a known cause:  
\_\_\_\_\_.

For questions 6 – 10, circle the appropriate response of TRUE or FALSE.

6. We should always believe what the veteran reports about his or her pain.

TRUE

FALSE

7. Warm or cold compresses are not helpful in relieving pain.

TRUE

FALSE

8. Confused people and the elderly have a higher pain tolerance.

TRUE FALSE

9. Nothing can be done to relieve certain types of pain.

TRUE FALSE

10. Elderly and disabled people are likely to get addicted to painkillers.

TRUE FALSE

**In order to receive your state-required home caregiver CEUs, you must mail this test along with your signed FORM 1732 Management and Training of Service Provider (on the next page) to:**

**CTADVRC – VDHCBS  
PO Box 729  
Belton TX 76513**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ of 10

Pass – Fail



