

# CANCER PAIN

## FAST FACTS

- Pain is a common cancer side effect. The global prevalence of chronic pain among cancer survivors is 41 percent, with overall cancer pain prevalence at approximately 45 percent.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Pain prevalence can vary significantly by treatment stage. About 54 percent of people with cancer report pain during palliative treatment, 55 percent during active treatment and 36 percent after curative treatment.<sup>2</sup> About 30 percent of people with cancer report moderate to severe pain.<sup>2</sup>
- Cancer pain can be caused by injury to the nerves, cancer spreading to the bones or other areas, and inflammation.<sup>3</sup>
- One study of cancer survivors in rural areas found more chronic pain in this population than in urban dwellers. Patients in rural areas may need additional resources to relieve pain after treatment.<sup>4</sup>

## MEDICATIONS FOR CANCER PAIN

Medications are the most common solution offered for cancer pain. These may be over-the-counter pain medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) or strong prescription pain medications called opioids, such as oxycodone (OxyContin). Some medications can also help treat [chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy \(CIPN\)](#).

You might be concerned that taking opioids will cause addiction. But this is not always true with cancer pain. In fact, undertreating pain because of fear of opioids might be more harmful for some people than using them. Clinical evidence confirms that opioids effectively reduce moderate-to-severe cancer pain and remain first-line treatment for cancer-related pain.<sup>4,5</sup>

If you have a history of drug or alcohol dependence, talk with your clinician before you start taking opioid medications. Research shows that among adolescent and young adult cancer patients, more than half are prescribed opioids during treatment and nearly one-quarter continue using opioids after treatment ends.<sup>6</sup> Read about the [3 Keys to Avoiding Opioid Dependency](#).

Medications are not your only option. Ask your doctor about ways to manage cancer pain besides medications. It's OK to think outside the box when it comes to cancer pain.

## Other ways to manage cancer pain

All medications have side effects, and these can be different for different people. If you do not like the side effects of your medication, talk to your doctor or someone else on your health care team. They may be able to change the dose or the medication to keep you more comfortable while relieving pain.

You can also try other ways of managing pain. Mind-body treatments such as guided imagery have been shown to lower the intensity of cancer pain and to help in other ways.<sup>7</sup> Recent research confirms that mind-body exercise (yoga, Qigong, tai chi) effectively reduces anxiety, depression and fatigue while improving sleep quality and quality of life in cancer patients.<sup>8</sup> Virtual reality-assisted guided imagery has also shown to help relieve cancer pain.<sup>9</sup>

You can try these techniques to manage pain whether you take medication or not.

- [Massage](#)
- [Guided imagery](#)
- [Breathwork](#)
- [Meditation, relaxation techniques and counseling](#)
- [Music therapy](#)
- Using sensory methods, such as [scrambler therapy](#)<sup>10,11</sup>

Other effective ways to relieve pain include:

- **Exercise** – This can relieve muscle pain and tension. Evidence-based research shows that 170 minutes per week of combined aerobic and resistance training provides the most significant pain reduction in cancer survivors.<sup>12</sup> A 2026 systematic review confirmed that structured exercise is an effective and safe

strategy for pain relief, with significant improvements in pain intensity, functional capacity, and quality of life.<sup>13</sup> Physical activity also reduces all-cause mortality by 26 percent in cancer patients.<sup>14</sup>

- **Acupuncture** – Both electro-acupuncture and auricular acupuncture significantly improve functional limitations in cancer survivors with chronic pain.<sup>15</sup> When combined with conventional therapy, acupuncture significantly improves pain relief and reduces opioid-related side effects.<sup>16</sup>

Choose a mind-body pain relief solution using this [free tool \(PDF\)](#).

It might not be possible to control all your pain without medication. However, you may be able to:

- Reduce the amount of medication you take
- Take less powerful medications, or
- Take medication less often.

For example, if you have bone pain from cancer, you might still need opioid medication, but you might not need as much to stay comfortable.

## Consider tracking your symptoms

The American Cancer Society has a [free pain diary \(PDF\)](#). You can use this to help you understand your cancer pain and keep track of it, including what helps. This can help you talk with your doctor or health care team about options for pain relief.

## FAQs about cancer pain

### Does all cancer cause pain?

Not necessarily. Many people with cancer do have pain at some point in their disease or treatment, but not everyone does.<sup>17</sup> Talk with your doctor if you are concerned about whether your type of cancer is likely to cause pain or what treatments might be painful.

### Can cancer pain be controlled?

Almost always. From medication to relaxation, there are many ways to manage pain from cancer and its treatment. Find the definitive guidelines on [integrative pain management for cancer](#) come from the American Society for Clinical Oncology and the Society for Integrative Oncology.

### How can meditation or breathwork help my pain?

These practices cause something called the “relaxation response” in your body. This response can lower your stress, calm fear and anxiety and reduce tension and pain. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to help people with cancer.<sup>18</sup> Learn more in our free Pocket Guide to Breathwork. You can also try [meditation with Dr. Jonas here](#).

## I am afraid to be physically active when I have cancer. Is it really safe?

Check with your doctor first. But studies show exercise can help relieve pain and has other benefits, too.<sup>12,13,14</sup> New guidelines recommend exercise for most cancer patients as an effective adjuvant strategy.<sup>19,20</sup> Learn more about increasing your body's ability to [heal with exercise](#). You can also download a free [Pocket Guide to Movement and Cancer](#).

Find information on [physical activity when you have cancer](#) from the American Cancer Society.

## Can I use cannabis products, like medical marijuana or CBD, for cancer pain?

Cannabis products are legal to use in many U.S. states. As of 2026, the federal government has reclassified these products and is exploring [expanded medical use and research options](#). Talk with your doctor or health care team about cannabis products.

Recent major clinical trials have found limited benefit for medicinal cannabis in cancer pain.<sup>21,22</sup> CBD oil alone was no better than placebo for pain relief, and a 1:1 THC/CBD combination showed only minor pain benefits with increased side effects such as drowsiness. Cannabis did not reduce the need for opioid painkillers in these studies.<sup>21</sup> A 2026 narrative review concluded that there continues to be limited evidence to support the use of medical cannabis for treatment of cancer-related pain.<sup>22</sup>

## How is palliative care different from hospice care?

If you have pain during active cancer treatment or are experiencing pain after treatment ends, it can be very helpful to work with a health care provider who specializes in “palliative care.”

Many people think palliative care is the same as hospice care because both focus on relieving symptoms and helping you have the best quality of life possible. Hospice care starts after cancer directed treatment is stopped and includes palliative care. A person receiving hospice care is not expected to survive their illness.<sup>23</sup> But palliative care is possible at any time. It can help you find solutions to cancer symptoms, treatment side effects and even the stress and anxiety of going through treatment.

## Resources

- [Integrative Medicine for Pain Management in Oncology: Society for Integrative Oncology–ASCO Guideline](#)
- [Taking Care of the Whole You: A Practical and Patient-Friendly Guide to Integrative Oncology](#) From the Society for Integrative Oncology and CancerChoices

