

Acute Pain Management

There can be many reasons why a person might be in the hospital...surgery, injury, managing an illness, such as cancer but in most cases, there is some pain involved. Acute pain is a type of pain that goes away after the body heals, and usually lasts less than three months.

In the hospital, patients are encouraged to get out of bed, to walk, before they can be sent home. Walking also helps prevent blood clots and pneumonia.

"It's pretty surprising, like they get you up and you are doing PT and you are learning to go up and down stairs safely. I was a little amazed by that." - Mary Jo, Patient

Mary Jo Wright's recent knee replacement surgery has helped her get her life back to normal. But it certainly involved its share of pain, in the hospital and beyond.

"Physical therapy is extremely painful, and you have to be ready to endure that to get the range of motion that you need. You just have to do it." - Mary Jo, Patient

Managing that acute pain in the hospital is based on each patient's condition and needs, but there are several options that can be considered.

"It's nice to kind of have a mix to use, maybe narcotics for that intense pain. Use the anti-inflammatories over the post-operative period, and then consider a nerve block to really treat that post-operative pain." - Dr. Julia Freed, Anesthesiologist

Narcotics, or opioid pain medications, are generally considered safe when taken for a short time as prescribed by a doctor. And there is a good reason to take them. Staying ahead of the pain helps you recover.

"If you use it how it's intended, you want to follow those instructions and treat that pain. If you don't treat your pain post-operative, it will lead to chronic pain. And that's a serious problem."
- Dr. Julia Freed, Anesthesiologist

But despite their usefulness, some patients, are nervous about taking opioids, knowing they can have many side effects and be addictive.

David Toy is one of them. The intense pain from back-to-back knee and elbow surgeries made opioids necessary for a while, but David was anxious to wean off them as quickly as possible.

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"I just didn't like the way it made me feel. And I was looking for other ways to be able to offset that pain. And I was able to work with my doctor to come up with something different." - David, Patient

The risk of addiction is very low when opioids are given for a short time to relieve acute pain. However, other side effects to be aware of include extreme tiredness or low blood pressure, trouble breathing, nausea, confusion, itching or hives, or constipation.

"They're uncomfortable but then the question is what's the intervention to help with that? What will have the patient feeling better and is it going to be an opioid that will make them feel better, or is it something else, like information, reassurance, relaxation, psychological interventions?" - Dr. Michael Miller, Addiction Medicine Physician

Working with his doctor, David found a way to manage his acute pain in a way that was comfortable for him.

"With my elbow surgery, with my therapy, I would wear a compression sleeve. There were things in terms of massaging. There were things with just making sure I stretched; go through the exercises that they prescribe." - David, Patient

Other alternatives to opioid pain medications might include:

Acetaminophen (Tylenol, for example), Aspirin, ibuprofen (such as Advil) or naproxen (such as Aleve), Breathing exercises, Physical therapy, Massage, or Relaxation techniques.

Talk to your healthcare team to see what they recommend.

Experts who study pain management say the best advice when it comes to managing your pain is to work with your doctor. If opioids are prescribed, ask how long they'll be needed and what will be done to help get you to the point where you no longer need them.

"You know, there's really no reason to be terrified of being, of taking an opioid if you're prescribed it. I think there needs to be that trust between a clinician or a doctor and you." - Matthew Hearing, PhD, Assistant Professor-Biomedical Science

Be honest with your healthcare team about your pain in the hospital and on follow-up visits. And don't be afraid to ask why you are given a certain medicine, what the benefits and risks are of taking it are, or if there might be other ways to manage your pain.

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The most important thing is get your acute pain under control, so you can go home from the hospital and continue the healing process.