

Pain Management

Ivy Phillips is a fighter. She is battling cancer – for the third time.

“I’m on a single pill a day, and a 30-minute infusion that I do every other week.”

Chemotherapy is one of a few different treatments Ivy has been on during her journey. And just as her treatments have varied, so have the side effects they’ve caused. One that she’s experienced repeatedly - is pain.

“I’ve had several types of pain, in types of areas like shoulder aches, or my hips ached; you know, pain in my wrists and fingers.”

Pain from cancer treatment can come in different forms, including Neuropathy – tingling, numbness, or sometimes a burning feeling in the hands, arms, legs, and feet and Mouth Sores– small cuts or ulcers on soft tissue, like the tongue and gums. Cancer itself can also cause pain. For example, when a tumor is pressing on nerves, or an organ in the body or when cancer spreads to the bones.

The good news is that in most cases, pain can be brought under control – or at least relieved.

“Never let anyone tell you that you have cancer and that comes with pain, and you have to suffer. There’s almost always something that can be done.”

A class of drugs called “Opioids” is often used for severe cancer-related pain. They work by reducing pain signals that are sent to the brain. Opioids are very strong and can be habit-forming; so, they are normally used for only short periods of time.

“For example, postoperative pain. Opioids are often prescribed with the understanding that it’ll be a couple of days, and the person will be weaned off the opioids, and then go on to more mild pain medications.”

If you are prescribed opioids, it is important not to stop your medication suddenly because you could have a reaction to withdrawal. The body needs time to adjust, by tapering- down, with lower doses. For pain that is not severe, your health care team may recommend other medications, including a type known as NSAIDS.

“Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory’ medication, which, by name, decreases the inflammation. And many causes of cancer pain are inflammatory, so this tends to help a good deal. And we also use ‘acetaminophen, which is not anti-inflammatory, but is a pain medication, and sometimes we use a combination of both.”

Be careful if you are taking several medications at one time. This increases the risk of reactions to medications including loss of appetite, tired or reduced alertness, confusion and hallucinations, depression, and anxiety. It can also lead to substance abuse. If you are concerned about being prescribed several medications at once or becoming addicted, talk to your healthcare provider or a pain specialist.

Applying a heating pad or an ice pack may also relieve or prevent certain types of pain. But be aware there are situations in which heat, or cold therapy should not be used.

Pain Management

“If you’ve had radiation therapy, make sure you check with the radiation therapist before you put cold or heat because they could have adverse side effects.”

Other options for pain relief include meditation; relaxation and deep-breathing exercises; massage; and acupuncture. But, just as with cold and heat therapy, there are certain cases in which massage and acupuncture should be avoided:

“You don’t want to hamper an area that’s freshly been operated on. You may not want to do acupuncture, certainly, in an area that had radiation therapy. So, all these things have to be investigated and discussed with your doctor; but they are all potential very good treatments for cancer pain.”

Finally – it may be helpful to keep a ‘Pain Journal.’ Take note of when you have pain, how severe it is on a scale of one to ten, and what you did to take care of it. Putting this in writing and tracking it over time can help you and your healthcare team identify what works best to keep you comfortable.

“Don’t be afraid to speak up, and work with your doctor to get the best pain control possible. It can only make your life better and make it easier to fight the cancer.”