

Pain – Opioids, part 2

Pain can help warn us that something isn't quite right. At its worst, pain can rob us of our sense of well-being. Two people with very similar injuries or illnesses can feel pain very differently. The burden of pain in the United States is very high. More than 100 million Americans have pain that lasts for weeks to years.



Pain can be called acute or chronic:

- **Acute pain** generally comes on suddenly, such as after an injury or surgery. The cause is usually known and can be treated. Acute pain only lasts a short period of time.
- **Chronic pain** can be the result of an injury or an illness. It can accompany other chronic health conditions. Chronic pain lasts a long time. It is hard to treat and causes a number of severe problems.



Pain is caused by signals from the body going to the brain. The nervous system uses a set of chemicals called **neurotransmitters** to communicate these signals.

The same part of the brain that signals you are in pain is the same part that signals your basic emotions. When a person feels negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, or anger, the same parts of the brain increase the feelings of pain. This makes coping with pain harder.

Our genes also affect how our body feels and responds to pain. Genes can affect our risk for having chronic pain and how sensitive we are to pain. Genes can also affect whether certain treatments will help and how we respond to acute or chronic pain.

Environment and early life experiences such as where you grew up, what opportunities you had, and trauma all contribute to your emotional well-being through your life. Sensitivity to pain is due to a combination of our genes and our emotions, as well as our environment and early life experiences.

How is Pain Diagnosed?

There is no test a doctor can use to measure pain precisely. During the medical exam, the patient may describe their pain as sharp, dull, constant, on-and-off, burning, or aching. The patient's description of their pain is called the **pain history**. This can help the doctor diagnose the cause of their pain, and recommend treatment.





How is Pain Treated?

The goal of pain management is to improve function in day-to-day activities. While not all pain is curable, it is important to remember that all pain is treatable.

There are many treatment options for pain other than opioids. They include acupuncture, over the counter pain medicines, biofeedback, counseling, electrical stimulation, nerve blocks, and surgery. Some pain treatments carry real risks and side effects. It is important to work with your healthcare provider to choose the best treatment for you and to monitor it carefully.

Be sure to get answers to any questions you have about opioids or substance use disorders. Your public health department, health care provider, and public library can help.