



## CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH PHYSICAL NEEDS

# Pain After Stroke

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Pain is common after a stroke. Pain means that the body is hurt or something is wrong. Every stroke survivor's pain is different. The pain may be mild or severe. It may last for a short time or be constant.

### What Do You Need to Know?

Pain after a stroke is caused by many things. Your loved one can have one or more types of pain. The key is to find the cause of the pain so it can be treated.

#### **Local Pain**

Local pain results from physical problems. After a part of the body is paralyzed (unable to move) or weakened, the muscles may become tight and stiff. These changes in the muscles can cause pain. This pain is often felt in the joints, most often in the shoulders. Your loved one may also have sore muscles from learning new ways to walk or move. Pain may be caused by lying or sitting in one place too long. Other common causes are pressure sores or painful leg cramps at night.

#### **Central Pain**

Central pain is a direct result of damage to the brain from the stroke. Sensations like light touch are felt as pain when they should not be painful. This pain is described as burning or aching. The pain is usually on the side of the body affected by the stroke. It is often constant and may get worse over time. Changes in cold and hot temperatures may increase the pain. Movement or touching may increase the pain.

### Why Is It Important to Get Help?

Talk to the healthcare team about your loved one's pain. Pain often leads to other problems. For instance, pain can cause depression and loss of sleep. Your loved one may stop moving a painful part of the body. Over time, the joint of this body part may "lock up" and your loved one will lose movement.

## What Treatments Should You Discuss with Your Healthcare Team?

Pain usually lessens with treatment. There are many treatments to ask about.

### **Pain Medicines**

Pain medicines are one of the most important treatments. Use pain medicines that your healthcare team suggests. Follow the directions on the label of the medicine. Give pain medicines on a regular basis. Do not wait until the pain gets bad to give pain medicines. Do not stop using medicines for fear of addiction. When pain medicines are used correctly, they do not cause addiction.

Over-the-counter (OTC) pain medicines, like Tylenol<sup>®\*</sup> or Advil<sup>®\*</sup> relieve mild pain. These OTC medicines may interact with other medicines your loved one takes. Check with your healthcare team before taking any OTC medicines. For more severe pain, stronger prescription pain medicines like narcotics are often needed.

Medicines used to treat depression, spasticity (tightness and stiffness of muscles) or seizures may relieve central pain. Shots or injections of cortisone (steroids) into joints like the shoulder may help.

### **Exercises**

Exercises to strengthen muscles can help your loved one move better. For example, stretching exercises decrease the tightness and soreness of the muscles. Talk with a physical therapist about the best exercise plan.

### **Heat Therapy**

Heat therapy like heating pads and warm baths may soothe sore muscles and stiff joints.

### **Electrical Nerve Stimulation**

Electrical nerve stimulation (often called TENS or TNS) improves the strength of the muscles and often reduces pain. Patches or electrodes are placed on the skin. A mild electrical current runs through these patches. This is not painful.

### **Complementary or Alternative Therapies**

Complementary or alternative therapies like acupuncture, massage therapy, and yoga often relieve pain.

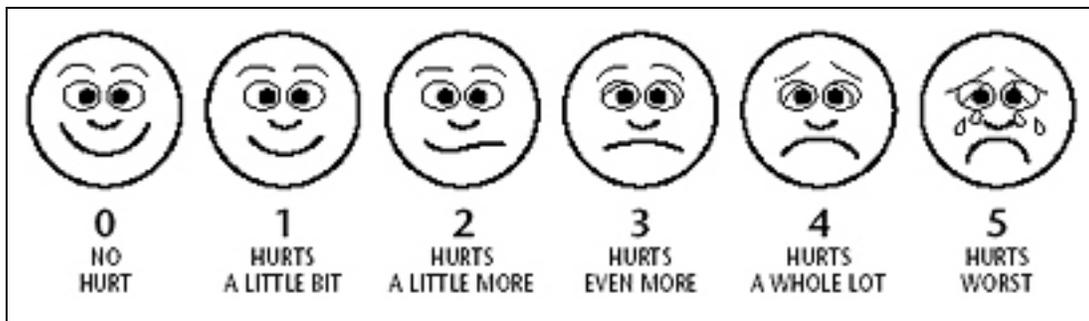
## What if the Pain Continues?

Everyone has the right to good pain control. Ask your healthcare team to try different treatments to relieve the pain. If the pain continues, ask about other types of care.

- Pain clinics are helpful for people whose pain is difficult to treat. Ask about pain clinics in your area.
- Psychologists help stroke survivors find ways to live with pain that cannot be completely relieved. Psychologists also help survivors who are sad or depressed due to living with pain.

## How Can You Help Your Loved One Describe the Pain?

Your healthcare team needs to know how your loved one feels. Ask your loved one to rate the pain. Use a pain scale of “0-10,” with “0” being no pain and “10” being the worst pain your loved one has ever felt. If your loved one can’t speak, use a pain scale, like the one below.



From Hockenberry MJ, Wilson D, Winkelstein ML: Wong's Essentials of Pediatric Nursing, <http://www.mosbysdrugconsult.com/cgi-bin/displaypage.pl?isbn=0323025935> ed. 7, St. Louis, 2005, p. 1259. Used with permission. Copyright, Mosby.

Take note of where your loved one hurts. What things bring on the pain? What makes it worse? When does the pain occur? How does it feel? Report these symptoms to your healthcare team. My Health<sup>e</sup>Vet has a pain journal you can use to track your loved one's pain. Go to <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>. You must be registered to use this feature.

Remember that some stroke survivors have trouble speaking. Watch for signs of pain such as moaning or changes in behaviors. Some stroke survivors may not feel pain. They may not know when they are cut or burned by hot water. Watch for sores and other injuries.

For more information on stroke caregiving, visit the RESCUE home page:  
<http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue>

## **Talk with Your Loved One About the Pain**

- Pain almost always is a real problem. Believe your loved one's complaints.
- Allow time for your loved one to talk about the pain.
- Talk about feelings of sadness related to the pain. Watch for signs of depression. Report problems to your healthcare team.

## **Helpful Tips**

- Help your loved one remain active to keep muscles strong and reduce pain.
- Talk with your healthcare team about correct ways to exercise. Also ask about how best to position paralyzed or weak arms and legs. Splints or other devices may be helpful.
- Support a weak or paralyzed arm to reduce pain in the shoulder. Ask your healthcare team about using an arm sling. Provide support for the arm on a lapboard or raised armrest. Use pillows while lying in bed.
- Have your loved one wear loose, comfortable clothing.
- Help your loved one relax. Find an activity that your loved one enjoys such as playing with the dog or watching television. Suggest activities like listening to music, reading a book, prayer or meditation.
- Use warm baths, showers, warm washcloths or heating pads. Be sure to check the temperature so as not to cause burns. Cool cloths and ice may also help. Talk with your healthcare team about the best plan.

## **Remember**

- Pain is almost always a real problem. Believe your loved one. Get help for any signs or problems of pain.
- Pain can cause other problems like depression and loss of sleep.
- Treatment is based on what is causing the pain. Ask about the pain. Help your loved one describe the pain to the healthcare team.
- Everyone has the right to good pain control. Ask for different treatments if the pain is not relieved.

## **More Resources**

The following resources contain internet links. The location of internet pages can change. Therefore the links provided may not always work. For the most current version of this list, go to <http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue/resources>. This page will be updated frequently.

**Link Disclaimer:** Links to information and Web sites outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs do not indicate an endorsement of products or services offered by the sites. In addition, these sites may have privacy and security policies that are inconsistent with those of VA.

### **American Pain Foundation**

Web: <http://www.painfoundation.org>

Phone: 1-888-615-7246

The American Pain Foundation has a tool called the “Pain Resource Locator” to provide you with information, support and resources to manage your pain. Go to this link: <http://www.painfoundation.org/learn/locator>

### **My HealtheVet (MHV)**

Web: <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>

My HealtheVet (MHV) provides trusted information on stroke and other health conditions. It also provides resources for stroke caregivers and tools to track your loved one’s health.

Also visit the Caregiver Assistance Center on the My HealtheVet Web site. This section provides more information on caregiving.

- Go to: <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>
- Click on the button that says “Enter Here”
- Click on “Research Health” on the top bar, then “Healthy Living Centers”
- Click on “Caregiver Assistance”

### **National Stroke Association**

Web: <http://www.stroke.org>

Phone: 1-800-787-6537

The National Stroke Association has helpful information on “Recovery After Stroke: Dealing with Pain.” Go to this link:

[http://www.stroke.org/site/DocServer/NSAFactSheet\\_Pain.pdf?docID=995](http://www.stroke.org/site/DocServer/NSAFactSheet_Pain.pdf?docID=995)

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**References:** National Stroke Association. (2006). *Recovery after Stroke: Dealing with Pain*. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from [http://www.stroke.org/site/DocServer/NSAFactSheet\\_Pain.pdf?docID=995](http://www.stroke.org/site/DocServer/NSAFactSheet_Pain.pdf?docID=995).

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\*Brand names and types of medicines are provided as examples only. Their inclusion does not mean that these products are endorsed by VA or any other Government agency. Also, if a particular brand name is not mentioned, this does not mean or imply that the product is unsatisfactory.