



# ARE YOU IN PAIN? Older Adults Use Pain Relievers More than any Other Age Group.

Pain is especially challenging to diagnose and treat in older adults, partly because this population tends to:

- Have multiple health conditions—for example, diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, poor circulation—so there could be several reasons for their pain. In addition, people with Alzheimer’s and those recovering from a stroke may have a particularly hard time describing pain, and often rely on caregivers to help communicate their discomfort.
- Be more susceptible to medication-related problems, including a high rate of some side effects and interactions with other medications.
- Under-report symptoms (many older people think that pain is an inevitable part of aging and they don’t want to complain or be a burden to their healthcare professional).

But pain isn’t something that should be ignored. Untreated pain can make it hard to do everyday activities. It can also leave you zapped of energy and understandably irritable.

The good news? There are many safe and effective pain therapies available, including medications. Pain-relieving medications are available over-the-counter (OTC) or by prescription. Your healthcare professional will select a medication based on the type of pain you have, how long you’ve had it, as well as any other health conditions you have and medications you take.

Medications that might be used to help reduce pain include:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol® and others; prescription forms are often combined with an opioid)
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (ibuprofen, aspirin, naproxen)
- Opioid analgesics (for example, hydrocodone plus acetaminophen [Vicodin® ], oxycodone plus)
- Acetaminophen (Percocet®, morphine)
- Corticosteroids (prednisone)
- Tricyclic antidepressants
- Certain anticonvulsant medications (gabapentin, pregabalin)
- Muscle relaxants
- Skin creams or patches (capsaicin or lidocaine)

Older adults use pain relievers more often than any other age group. But because this group is more prone to side effects from these medications, it’s important to know some of the safety concerns.

**Even though pain is common in older people, it doesn’t mean it’s healthy. Pain isn’t something you—or someone you care for—should have to live with, so be sure to let your healthcare professionals know if you are experiencing any pain.**

## MUST Keep in Mind—Safety Concerns for Taking Certain Pain Medications

- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** like ibuprofen and naproxen help to reduce inflammation or swelling, which can make pain worse. The concern is that long-term use of NSAIDs can cause serious side effects in older people. In particular, the risk of stomach or gastrointestinal bleeding is much higher than for younger people. Other problems may include indigestion, stomach ulcers, easy bruising and heart problems. If you have a history of kidney or heart problems, check with your healthcare professional before taking an NSAID.
- Taking too much **acetaminophen**—which is a popular ingredient in many pain relievers and cough and cold medicines—can cause serious liver damage. Never take more than 4,000 mg of acetaminophen per day from all sources. Look for acetaminophen in the list of ingredients for all of the medications you take and do not take more than one at a time for each product that has it. Ask your healthcare professional or pharmacist if you are unsure about whether you are taking too much. **Coming soon, expanded information about acetaminophen and older adults.**
- **Opioid medications**—often used to treat moderate-to-severe pain in certain people—are believed to be safer for older people than NSAIDs. They can cause drowsiness and constipation, among other side effects. Although feeling tired is fairly common when you first start taking an opioid, let your healthcare professional know if you continue to feel overly fatigued or out of it. He or she may be able to adjust the dose or switch you to a different opioid.

Constipation can and should be managed so you don't have to live with the pain.

- As with any medication you take, be sure to tell your doctor if you have any side effects. Remember, taking more of the medication than is recommended in an effort to get added pain relief can be dangerous.

If you have children or teens in your home, keep all pain medications out of sight and try not to take medicine in front of them. Do not keep unused or expired medications in your house. Ask your pharmacist if the pharmacy can dispose of these medications or knows of a prescription drug take back program or other proper disposal program in your community. (Download NCPIE's [Tips on Safe Storage and Disposal](#)!).

Keep in mind, medications are only one part of managing pain. Visit the American Pain Foundation at [www.painfoundation.org](http://www.painfoundation.org) for more information, online support or to download tools to help keep track of your pain and its treatment.

## Resources

American Pain Foundation  
[www.painfoundation.org](http://www.painfoundation.org)

American Geriatrics Society Foundation for Health in Aging  
[www.healthinaging.org](http://www.healthinaging.org)