

Informulary

Great news about your drug plan!

Chronic Pain in Canada

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It is estimated that close to 20% of Canadians experience chronic pain. The effects of this impact not only the patient but society as a whole through billions of dollars a year in health costs, lost productivity, and the social cost to lives that are derailed by addiction or depression¹.



Pain Medications

There are three main categories of medications for the management of pain. These include acetaminophen, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and opioids.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol®)

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is commonly recommended to manage mild to moderate pain, due to its general safety. Recently, Health Canada announced that it is considering a new maximum recommended daily dose for acetaminophen. These additional steps are intended to minimize the risk of liver damage and improve acetaminophen safety². There are more than 4,000 hospitalizations a year in Canada due to acetaminophen overdoses³.

NSAIDs (Advil®, naproxen, Celebrex®)

NSAIDs are a class of medications that reduce pain and improve inflammation. They are commonly used for short-term conditions such as sports injuries or headaches. Long-term use of these medications can increase a person's risk of serious stomach and heart problems^{4,5}. As such, these drugs are normally recommended for short-term use at the lowest effective dose.




Opioids (codeine, oxycodone, fentanyl)

Opioids are normally reserved for moderate to severe pain, and are generally safe for patients with kidney, liver or heart disease. However, they are commonly associated with adverse effects such as constipation and sleepiness⁶, and more seriously, with addiction and abuse.

A portion of patients who are prescribed opioids divert or inappropriately use their medication. This abuse and diversion is leading to many of the opioid-related deaths in Canada and thus has been a major focus among groups of pain specialists, coroner's offices, law enforcement agencies, politicians and the media. Fentanyl, in particular, is finding its way to the Canadian illicit drug market in both the legitimate prescription patches that drug abusers chew or smoke for an immediate and extremely powerful high, and illicitly manufactured pill forms made to look like OxyContin, a less powerful narcotic. Cocaine and heroin are increasingly being laced with Fentanyl, dramatically boosting their potency with fatal consequences⁷.

What Can Be Done

The optimal strategy is to manage and reduce pain medications, while looking at other complementary pain reduction strategies. This multi-tiered approach is often very effective for chronic pain sufferers. Commonly used therapies and techniques include⁷:

1. Deep breathing or meditation to help you relax.
2. Reducing stress. Stress and anger can increase your body's sensitivity to pain.
3. Exercising. Exercise releases natural endorphins that help block pain signals.
4. Quitting smoking. Smoking can make painful circulation problems worse.
5. Finding ways to distract yourself. Focusing on pain makes it worse rather than better.
6. Thinking positive. It's a powerful tool and can make a difference in your perceived level of comfort. 

References

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