

Living Longer and Wiser: How Seniors Can Cope With Chronic Pain

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are approximately 41.4 million Americans seniors who are over the age of 65; and the US Administration on Aging reports that the senior population is expected to rise, becoming approximately 20 percent of the population by the year 2030. The CDC further indicates that seniors tend to report more often than younger adults that they have pain lasting longer than a year. Thus, chronic pain is emerging as a major health issue as the population ages.

And chronic pain is a significant and costly health problem. According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, for example, \$13.2 billion was spent on outpatient prescription pain medication from 1996 to 2006.

SELF-MANAGEMENT IS KEY

In my experience working with patients dealing with chronic pain, I've learned how valuable self-management skills are. Not only can self-management help in dealing with pain, it helps with a variety of conditions associated with pain among the elderly, including depression, anxiety, sleep problems, social isolation, and problems with ambulation. Finally, self-management contributes to lower costs—for individual patients and the nation as a whole.

“Self-management” is a broad term for a number of skills and behaviors, including: skills for problem-solving issues and stressors associated with persistent pain; making decisions based on knowledge about the pain condition (for example, deciding when to seek out medical attention for a symptom); and resource utilization (such as finding and using resources for pain management). Self-management also includes using strategies for forming positive working relationships with health care providers,



and taking action to change a behavior and/or carry out a goal (which may include the use of coping skills).

EDUCATION AND COPING SKILLS

“Coping” with pain does not mean just gritting your teeth and putting up with it. Indeed, patients can master coping skills that are important in managing pain. Using coping skills as a part of self-management also can be helpful for problems associated with pain (such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, etc.). These skills include the use of distraction to take one’s attention away from pain (for example, using imagery, or counting backwards) and accepting the reality of the pain condition through the use of mindfulness strategies (such as meditation). This acceptance allows for seniors to be at peace with understanding that their chronic pain condition may occur indefinitely.

Changing negative thoughts that can lead to increased pain and emotional distress is an additional coping skill. Certain behavioral strategies are also useful, such as encouraging seniors to pace their activities to avoid the tendency to overexert themselves; increasing involvement in pleasant activities; and using relaxation strategies. These coping skills, combined with the behavioral methods, are commonly called cognitive-behavioral treatment, shown to be very helpful for chronic pain. Importantly, using self-management skills (specifically coping skills) can be helpful for allowing seniors to change feelings of helplessness, reduce catastrophizing (magnifying how threatening pain is), and improve their belief that they can lessen their pain. The use of self-management strategies along with medical treatment for pain can lead to better pain management and improved quality of life for seniors.

Patient education can play a large role in pain management, especially when paired

with coping skills. It can be helpful to provide seniors and their families information about the biological aspects of pain, its medical management, and self-management strategies. Involving the family in education can allow for what is taught to be reinforced to seniors via their support system.

KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER

- The senior population is large and is expected to rise.
- Health care costs for pain management among the elderly are substantial.
- Self-management is key for pain management and can be helpful in reducing costs.
- Self-management includes using skills related to problem-solving, decision making, resource utilization, forming positive relationships with health care providers, and taking action (including use of coping skills) for pain management.
- Coping skills include distraction, acceptance strategies, pacing activities, changing negative thoughts, being involved in pleasant activities, and relaxation strategies.
- It is important to include family members and significant others when providing education about pain and for encouraging self-management. These supportive individuals can help reinforce the use of self-management skills. **h&h**

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