



Communicating With Your Provider to Manage Chronic Pain



Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use: A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers

Introduction | This guide provides tips about how to work with your provider to develop a pain management plan designed for you. The guide also outlines information to discuss with your provider when considering use of opioids. People who work in partnership with their providers experience safer and more satisfying outcomes.

This conversation guide is organized into five steps:

- Step 1.** Understand your own pain experience and concerns.
- Step 2.** Establish priorities and goals with your provider.
- Step 3.** Consider the risks and benefits of your options.
- Step 4.** Reach a decision with your provider about your pain management plan.
- Step 5.** Work with your provider to adjust your pain management plan and for safer opioid use.



Understand your pain experience and concerns.

- Think through how pain affects your life. Be ready to share this information with your provider.
- Identify your goals for managing pain. Living pain free may not be possible. But you and your provider can come up with a plan to make your pain more tolerable and to help you function more easily. See the *Knowledge Hub* resource [Developing a Plan for Self-Management of Pain](#). This resource will help you set goals and develop a plan for managing pain.
- Learn about your pain management options. Research shows that regular physical activity, yoga, acupuncture, mindfulness and meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy, and massage can help control pain. Managing pain often takes trial and error and a combination of methods.

The table below lists **questions to ask yourself** before you talk with your provider. Answering these questions will prepare you to discuss changes in your pain management plan.

Understanding Your Pain Experience and Needs	Questions to Ask Yourself
How your pain affects your activity and mood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do you avoid certain activities because of pain? For example, do you avoid going shopping for food or taking a walk? ■ Do certain activities make you hurt more? ■ Are you able to sleep? How many hours a day do you spend sitting or lying in bed? ■ How does your pain affect your mood? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Do you have trouble relaxing? – Do you get angry quickly?
Past medical treatments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What medical treatments have you tried that reduced your pain or improved your function? ■ What medical treatments did not help you?
Methods used to manage your pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What have you tried to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prevent your pain from getting worse? – Reduce your pain? ■ Did these approaches work?
Provider experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does your provider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Listen to you? – Consider your input when recommending treatments? – Suggest treatments other than medication to help your pain? For example, an occupational or a physical therapist, trigger point injections, or self-management approaches ■ Is your provider open to your questions and ideas?



Establish priorities and goals with your provider.

- Figure out what you want to achieve by setting specific and realistic goals. These resources will help you identify your pain management goals:
 - See the *Knowledge Hub* resource [Developing a Plan for Self-Management of Pain](#) for tips on setting goals and developing a plan for managing pain.
 - Watch the video [Pathways Through Pain: Priorities and Goals](#) from the American Chronic Pain Association. This 17-minute video offers practical advice from an expert and people with chronic pain on setting and prioritizing goals.

Goal-Setting Topics	Questions to Ask Yourself
Activity goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What did you do before your pain got worse that you would like to do now?
Pain control goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Since eliminating chronic pain is usually not possible, what is success to you? For example, is success: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Having fewer episodes where your pain level is high? – Not having pain wake you up at night?



Consider the risks and benefits of your treatment options.

- Before your visit, learn about self-management and medical treatment options you would like to consider. This will prepare you to discuss your options and ask questions during the visit. Here are some resources that may be helpful:
 - See the *Knowledge Hub* resource [Methods for Managing Chronic Pain Other Than Medication](#) for tips on how you can manage pain on your own.
 - See the Mayo Clinic resource on [Chronic Pain: Medication Decisions](#) to learn about the risks and benefits of different pain medication options.
- Ask questions if you would like to know more or don't understand what is said. There are no stupid questions.
- Be sure you understand the risks, side effects, and how much improvement to expect with each option. For example, some common side effects of opioids are constipation, nausea, and sleepiness.
- People with chronic pain often experience depression. If you often feel sad, let your provider know. Depression can be [treated](#).
- Answer these questions to assess your mental health before your visit:
 - [Patient Health Questionnaire for Depression](#). Providers commonly use this questionnaire to screen for depression.
 - [Anxiety Questionnaire](#). Providers commonly use this questionnaire to screen for anxiety.

The table below lists topics to discuss with your provider about your treatment options. Discussing these topics will help you and your provider decide what pain management treatments to try.

Topics	Information to Share With Your Provider
Share information relevant to your health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strategies that you tried in the past to manage your pain that worked or didn't work ■ What you are doing to help yourself manage your pain now ■ If you are sad or anxious a lot of the time
If you are considering taking opioids, share relevant information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If you or a blood relative had a problem with opioids, drugs, alcohol, or other substances ■ If you are you living with someone who is using drugs or is at risk of using drugs
Ask questions if you are considering opioids or other pain medication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The amount of pain relief that you can expect ■ How well opioid medication works after taking it a while ■ Side effects and risks of pain medications ■ Other options if opioid medications don't work or you don't want to try them
Share your expectations and treatment preferences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Things you would you like to do that you cannot do now because of pain ■ Concerns about treatment costs ■ Concerns about side effects and risks of taking medication ■ Challenges you might have following through with treatments



Reach a decision with your provider about your pain management plan.

- Make sure you understand what you need to do before leaving your provider's office. Ask for information in writing, take notes, or audio-record the visit on your phone.
- Ask your provider how long it will take to see an improvement in your pain.
- Ask what you should do if a treatment does not make you better, or if you have side effects or get worse.
- If your provider refers you to a pain management program:
 - Is it for one visit only?
 - Will the pain management program treat your pain from now on instead of your provider?
 - Communicate with the pain management program about what type of accommodations you need before the visit.
- Don't be nervous about asking your provider questions or sharing concerns. This includes concerns about your use of drugs, alcohol, or other substances. Your doctor's goal is to keep you safe and to help you feel well.
- If you're concerned about your opioid use, see the *Knowledge Hub* resource [Communicating With Your Provider For Safer Opioid Use](#) for a conversation guide about tapering or stopping opioids.



Work with your provider to adjust your pain management plan and for safer opioid use.

If your pain doesn't improve within the expected time frame, schedule a visit with your provider to discuss next steps. You may need to talk about the following options:

- Adjusting your medication
- Trying new ways to self-manage your pain. Managing chronic pain usually takes a mix of lifestyle changes and pain management approaches. See these *Knowledge Hub* resources:
 - [Moving From the Cycle of Pain to a Cycle of Wellness](#)
 - [Methods for Managing Chronic Pain Other Than Medication](#)
- Seeing a specialist such as a rheumatologist, physiatrist, or pain medicine provider

If you're not able to build a working partnership with your provider, consider looking for a new provider. Finding the right provider who meets your needs may take research.

- To learn how to find a qualified provider, go to this University of Minnesota resource: [How Can I Find a Good Provider?](#)
- To search for ratings on doctors in your area, *Consumer Reports* lists search tools at the bottom of this web page: [How to Find a Good Doctor.](#)

If your pain management plan includes opioids, you will need to be an active partner with your provider to monitor your pain and follow safe opioid use practices. The table below lists those practices.

Topic	Action Steps for Safer Opioid Use
Regular office visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Come in for an office visit every 1 to 3 months. Keep your appointment even if you are doing well. ■ Tell your provider how often you take opioids each day and how many pills you take. ■ Bring in your opioid pill bottle. ■ Provide a urine sample during the visit. This may happen only during some visits. This routine care is to check for the presence of opioids. ■ Share information about any opioid side effects you have. ■ When you visit other providers, tell them about all the medication you are taking. Opioids may interact with other medications.
Safe opioid use practices at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Don't take more pills than prescribed at one time, and don't take pills more often than prescribed. ■ Take no more opioids than you need. ■ Store the pills in a safe place where others can't get them. People who develop opioid addiction often get the medication from someone they know. ■ Fill opioid prescriptions from the same pharmacy each time.



Resources to Help You Stay Safe and Informed When Taking Opioids

[Understanding Signs and Symptoms of Opioid Use Disorder](#)

This *Knowledge Hub* resource explains the feelings and behaviors that are found with opioid use disorder.

[Communicating With Your Provider For Safer Opioid Use](#)

This *Knowledge Hub* resource serves as a conversation guide for talking with your provider about tapering or stopping opioids or about a problem with opioid use.

[Taking Opioids Responsibly for Your Safety and the Safety of Others](#)

This guide from the Veterans Administration offers information about opioid safety and managing side effects.

[Having a Plan for an Opioid Emergency](#)

This 5-minute video from the American Chronic Pain Association explains the signs of an opioid overdose and how to give naloxone, a drug that treats opioid overdose.



For more information visit: Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use: A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers | [KnowledgeHub.air.org](https://www.knowledgehub.air.org)

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