

Pain management

Pain is your body's way of telling you that something is wrong. Pain can be described as steady, jabbing, throbbing, aching, pinching, burning, shooting or dull. Everyone's experience of pain is different and may be influenced by biological, psychological or social factors.

When it comes to cancer, many people experience pain, but some do not. Cancer pain depends on the type of cancer you have, the stage of cancer, the treatment you are undergoing and whether you have other health conditions.

What causes cancer pain?

Pain that is related to cancer may be caused by several factors:

- the cancer itself
- tests used to diagnose your cancer
- treatment for your cancer (e.g. surgery, radiation therapy and drug therapies)
- post-treatment pain or complications caused by treatment (e.g. surgery)
- advanced cancer pressing on other parts of the body or causing other complications
- cancer treatment may cause constipation
- cancer that spreads to other parts of the body (e.g. bones)

Pain related to upper GI cancers

Pancreatic cancer

Pancreatic cancer may involve pain in the pancreas, tummy (abdomen) or back - due to cancer affecting the

nerves and organs near the pancreas. Pancreatic cancer may cause other complications that lead to pain such as:

- blockage of the duodenum (first part of the small intestine) that prevents food from moving out of the stomach easily
- fluid build-up in the abdominal area (called ascites)
- advanced cancer can spread to the liver, causing it to grow larger

Stomach cancer

Stomach cancer may involve painful indigestion or heartburn, abdominal discomfort or pain above the navel. It's common to experience a build-up of fluid in the abdomen which can be uncomfortable or painful.

Liver cancer

Liver cancer may cause pain in the upper right area of your abdomen or near your right shoulder blade. Sometimes pain can extend into your back and be felt in the lower right part of your rib cage. Liver cancer may cause other complications that lead to pain such as:

- swelling in the abdomen, legs and ankles
- the enlarged liver puts pressure on nerves under the diaphragm

Oesophageal cancer

Oesophageal cancer often involves pain when swallowing. You may also feel pain in the middle of your chest that

feels like pressure or burning, or chest pain a few seconds after swallowing. This is usually a result of food being passed around the tumour.

Biliary cancer

Early biliary cancer doesn't usually cause pain. Large tumours or advanced cancer may cause pain on the right side of your abdomen, just below your ribs.

Ways to manage pain

If you feel any pain, let your doctor or nurse know straight away. The sooner you begin to manage it, the more likely you are to get the pain under control. Upper GI cancer pain can be managed with:

- **Pain relief medication** – these include paracetamol, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen or naproxen and opioid painkillers such as morphine or oxycodone.
- **Other medications** – drugs that are used to treat other conditions may help manage different kinds of pain such as nerve pain, soft tissue pain or bone pain; or they may be medications to relieve painful or uncomfortable side effects of your cancer or treatment.
- **Nerve blocks or spinal injections** – used to control nerve pain.
- **TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation)** – a small device worn on the body that emits small electrical pulses which reduce pain signals to the brain.
- **Radiotherapy** – also known as palliative radiotherapy, this is used to shrink cancer to help relieve pain.

- **Chemotherapy** – palliative chemotherapy can also be used to slow the growth of cancer to relieve pain symptoms.
- **Other therapies** – these may include physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychological therapy and complementary therapies (e.g. acupuncture, aromatherapy, hypnotherapy, massage, meditation, reflexology, relaxation). *Note: If you are using complementary therapies, speak to your doctor as some may have unwanted reactions or side effects.*

Learning to manage your pain can be overwhelming. These tips may help you feel more in control:

- Understand what may cause your pain, different options to treat it and potential side effects.
- Ask your treating team questions about things you're unsure of.
- Follow your treatment plan and keep notes on how your pain responds to treatment.
- Tell your doctor or nurse if you notice new pain, breakthrough pain (a sudden, brief flare-up), more intense pain or pain that is not relieved with treatment.
- Do not change the dose of your medication without your doctor's advice.

Where to get help

For more information about pain and symptom management, speak to your healthcare team or contact our Specialist Nurse Support Team on **1300 881 698** or **support@pancare.org.au**.

To find a healthcare provider visit Pain Australia **painaustralia.org.au/pain-services-directory**.

Information provided by Pancare Foundation is not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, treatment or other health care services. Pancare Foundation may provide information to you about physicians, products, services, clinical trials or treatments related to upper gastrointestinal cancer, but Pancare Foundation does not recommend nor endorse any healthcare resource if not specified.

