

Tips for Managing Resident Pain

Pain is a discomforting experience affecting a high percentage of older adults in nursing homes that can ultimately affect quality of life. It can be caused by a number of factors such as fractures, arthritis and neuropathies. Pain can have more than one identifiable cause or it can have no identifiable cause at all.

Pain is complex and challenging to assess and treat. Residents who are in pain can be depressed and exhibit changes in behavior, eating and sleep patterns. Residents who cannot verbalize their pain or who have dementia often cannot tell staff they are in pain, or describe the location of their pain. However, these residents express their pain through their actions.

It is important that pain be treated. If it is not treated, it can affect a resident's health and lead to secondary conditions and decreased quality of life. To improve and maintain quality of life, a resident should be able to be pain-free.

Caring for Residents in Pain

Staff should continually measure the pain of residents.

- Upon admission to a nursing home, quarterly and with each change in condition, staff should ask residents (verbally or in writing) if they have pain. Questions should include, but are not limited to:
 - Are you in pain?
 - How bad is the pain you experience?
 - How long have you had pain?
 - Is the pain constant?
 - Where are you having pain?
 - What does the pain feel like?
 - What makes the pain better or worse?
- When observing residents for signs of pain, staff should observe a resident as he/she walks, moves, eats and completes their other activities of daily living.
- When a resident is non-verbal or has dementia, the staff should closely observe and listen for non-verbal signs of pain such as moaning, crying, or holding a body part.

Staff should work to identify the cause of resident pain.

- A physical exam should be completed to find the cause of the resident's pain.
- If needed, x-rays or further tests should be completed.

Staff should coordinate with the residents and their families regarding the plan of care for pain management.

- When care planning, pain management should be discussed with the staff, residents and families.
- Families should be involved in the development of care plans for pain management.

A resident should always have his/her pain treated.

- A combination of remedies can be used to manage resident pain. Relief can come from medications and non-pharmacological interventions such as massage, music therapy and aroma therapy.

Frequent checks should be done by staff to ensure resident pain is being relieved and the resident is feeling better.

- Residents should be asked throughout each day if they have pain.
- Residents should report any pain. Additionally, their families should report residents' pain to staff.
- If residents are not reporting their pain, the staff should identify ways to help the residents report pain.

A Successful Pain Management Story:

To read a story about an Illinois nursing home that is successfully managing resident pain go to: [Pain Management Success Story](#)

September 2008

Feature: Issue 7

Nursing Home Successfully Manages Resident Pain

Dorothy and her friend, Rebecca, have a lot in common. The close friends are both happy residents at Washington Christian Village in Washington. Both were born in 1921. Both shared the same passion for square dancing. And, one of their unfortunate commonalities: both have suffered from chronic pain in their later years.

Through appropriate quality programs and interventions at Washington Christian Village, their pain has been significantly reduced. Washington Christian Village is one of hundreds of nursing homes across Illinois participating in the [Road to Excellence](#) quality initiative program.

Chronic pain is more common among older adults and it has shown to reduce quality of life. Washington Christian Village is dedicated to improving and maintaining quality of life for their residents, not reducing it. Staff like Cathy Douglas, director of nursing, work hard to identify and assess any pain and implement resident-centered pain management strategies needed to reduce, if not eliminate it.

Cathy has been a nurse for more than 30 years and said that a high percentage of residents are benefitting from assessment and management of various forms of pain. "On admission, we have a pain questionnaire we use for residents and that usually triggers further assessment," said Cathy.

When pain is identified, an appropriate quality therapy or pain management program is implemented. Rebecca's hand pain from arthritis was alleviated through paraffin therapy, in which hot wax rubbed on her hands soothed the pain.

Like Rebecca, Dorothy found an end to the ever-increasing pain and distress from her diabetic neuropathies through the pain management strategies at Washington Christian Village. While Rebecca revealed her pain during completion of the pain questionnaire when she arrived at Village, the staff needed further assessment to determine what was bothering Dorothy.

“I went through a period where I did not want to see or talk to anyone. I just wanted to be left alone,” explained Dorothy. “I didn’t even want to socialize with Rebecca, and she has been my dear, closest friend for over 30 years.” Dorothy has had diabetes since she was a teen and over time she has developed nerve damage that has caused severe pain and discomfort in her legs.

Changes in behaviors, activity patterns or routines are an indicator of a resident in pain. When the two close-knit friends were not seen together visiting and laughing as they did each day, the nurses recognized it and investigated what the problem was.

After a thorough pain assessment, Dorothy began receiving therapy in addition to medications prescribed by her physician. Staff eased the pain by placing hot packs on her legs daily and she found comfort in sitting in the physical therapy whirlpool as well. Nurses and staff constantly communicate and collaborate with physicians and therapists relating to managing the pain of residents. With quality care and pain management, residents like Dorothy and Rebecca are enjoying their lives and each other’s company without the interruption of pain.

Note: This feature article describes a success story of pain management for two residents. Identifying, assessing and managing resident pain are important components of the [Road to Excellence](#) quality improvement campaign.