



FROM THE SPAMEC HEALTH CONCERNS COMMITTEE

Breast Cancer Awareness Month and Chronic Pain Management

During National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, you are encouraged to take action for yourself and get screened for breast cancer as well as to encourage friends and family members to get screened. Early detection is the most important contributing factor to a good prognosis.

Chronic or acute pain is an often-unspoken issue among breast cancer patients. Many find that their doctors are chiefly concerned about disease management, placing less emphasis on treating the many symptoms of cancer and the side effects of cancer treatment. Other patients may consider pain an unavoidable side effect of cancer. As a result, they won't voice concerns about pain management during doctor appointments. Inadequately managed cancer pain can cause a host of negative effects on both cancer patients and their families.

Early-stage breast cancer doesn't typically cause significant pain. However, in some cases, early-stage tumors can cause tenderness, swelling and discomfort.

Advanced breast cancer (Stage IV) causes significant pain in 70% to 90% of patients. This is because the cancer has spread to parts of the body beyond the breast and is pressing on nerves, organs or bones. While the disease itself can cause physical pain, breast cancer treatments can also cause intense pain and discomfort. Chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and breast cancer surgery (mastectomy) can each cause unique pain symptoms that negatively impact quality of life.

It's important to know how and when to discuss your pain with the doctor or pain specialist. Pain is a subjective experience. Your experience with cancer pain may be different from other patients and may require different approaches to treatment. Keep a pain journal. Some important aspects to log and discuss with the doctor:

- The location of the pain
- When the pain commonly occurs
- The type of pain (Is the pain an aching, burning, stinging, or stabbing pain?)
- The severity of the pain (using a 1-10 scale)
- Pain treatments you have tried and how well they have worked

Request a referral to a different pain management provider if you aren't receiving effective treatment from your doctor.

Individuals with metastatic breast cancer often experience intense pain in the areas of the body where the cancer has spread. The most common areas of the body for breast cancer to metastasize are the bones, liver, brain and lungs. Bone cancer in particular can cause excruciating pain and weak, brittle bones. Depending on the nature and severity of your pain, a pain specialist may recommend opioid medications, physical therapy and massage, steroid injections, or nerve blocks.

Chemotherapy has been used effectively to treat cancer for over 70 years. While the treatments are effective at attacking cancerous active cells, they also attack healthy active cells. This can cause a number of painful symptoms, including muscle aches, stomach pain, peripheral nerve damage and neuropathy. Several treatments available that can address these types of cancer pain:

- Over-the-counter pain relievers: NSAIDs, acetaminophen, Naproxen
- Opioid pain medications
- Physical therapy and massage
- Acupuncture
- Steroid injections
- Nerve block and ablation

The doctor may recommend additional pain management options.

Radiation therapy uses low doses of radiation to target and kill cancer cells. Unfortunately, it can also destroy healthy cells. This can cause pain and discomfort in multiple areas of the body. Rarely, radiation therapy can cause neuropathic pain (neuropathy). Some radiation-related neuropathy can be treated using nerve blocks and spinal cord stimulation therapy.

Breast cancer removal surgery (mastectomy) is a surgical procedure in which all of the breast tissue of one breast is removed in order to treat breast cancer. Many women who undergo a mastectomy experience Post-Mastectomy Pain Syndrome (PMPS), a condition that causes neuropathic pain in the chest and surrounding areas. Some cases of PMPS can be treated using injections. Only the doctor can determine if you are a candidate for this type of pain management.