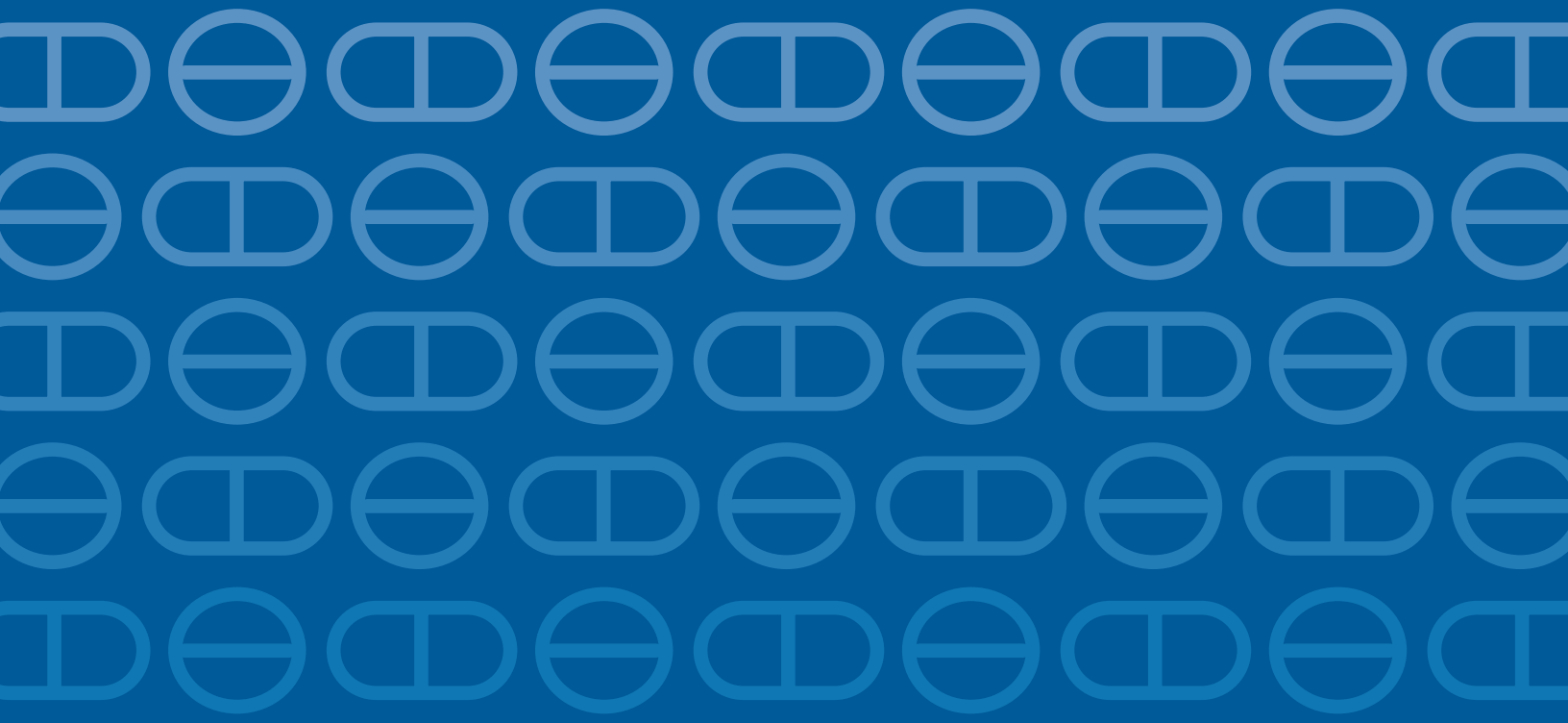
Alosa Health

Bringing unbiased evidence to clinical care

Managing non-cancer pain

The most recent evidence on effective, safe strategies



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The most recent evidence on effective, safe strategies

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Alosa Health

Managing non-cancer pain

Activity Start Date: April 3, 2026
Activity Termination Date: April 2, 2029

This activity offers CE credit for:

1. Medicine (AMA)
2. Nurses (ANCC)
3. Other

All other attendees will receive a Certificate of Attendance

Activity Overview:

The primary goal of this educational program is to address the challenge of effectively managing patients with non-cancer pain. It focuses on setting functional goals, optimizing management with a combination of evidence-based options, both pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic, and understanding the latest recommendations regarding opioid prescribing and strategies to reduce specific risks, such as prescribing naloxone.

The educational program includes a written evidence report (print monograph) and several non-CME/CE components:

1. Summary document of top 4-5 key messages
2. “Academic detailing” educational sessions in clinicians’ offices with trained outreach educators (pharmacists, nurses, physicians) who present the material interactively
3. Reference cards for easy access to key materials
4. Patient education information (brochure/tear off sheets)

This program synthesizes current clinical information on this topic into accessible, non-commercial, evidence-based educational material, which is taught interactively to providers by specially trained clinical educators.

Learning Objectives:

After completing this activity, participants will be able to:

- Develop functional goals and set realistic expectations with patients as part of an individualized pain management plan.
- Select evidence-based non-pharmacologic and non-opioid pharmacologic options for acute pain and common chronic non-cancer pain conditions
- Assess the risks and benefits of opioid therapy, when used, including criteria for continuation, tapering, discontinuation, or switching to buprenorphine.
- Identify patients at increased risk for opioid-related harm and implement risk-mitigation strategies, including naloxone prescribing and appropriate monitoring

Financial Support:

There is no commercial support associated with this activity.

Target Audience:

The educational program is designed for physicians, including general internal medicine doctors, family practice physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, and all other clinicians caring for patients who have pain.

Credit Information:

In support of improving patient care, this activity has been planned and implemented by CME Outfitters, LLC and Alosa Health. CME Outfitters, LLC is jointly accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME), the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE), and the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), to provide continuing education for the healthcare team.

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Note to Osteopathic Physicians: The AOA automatically recognizes *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit* ™ as AOA Category 2 credit.

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Nurses: This activity is designated for 2.5 nursing contact hours.

California Residents: This continuing nursing education activity was approved by the California Board of Registered Nursing. CME Outfitters LLC's provider number is CEP15510.

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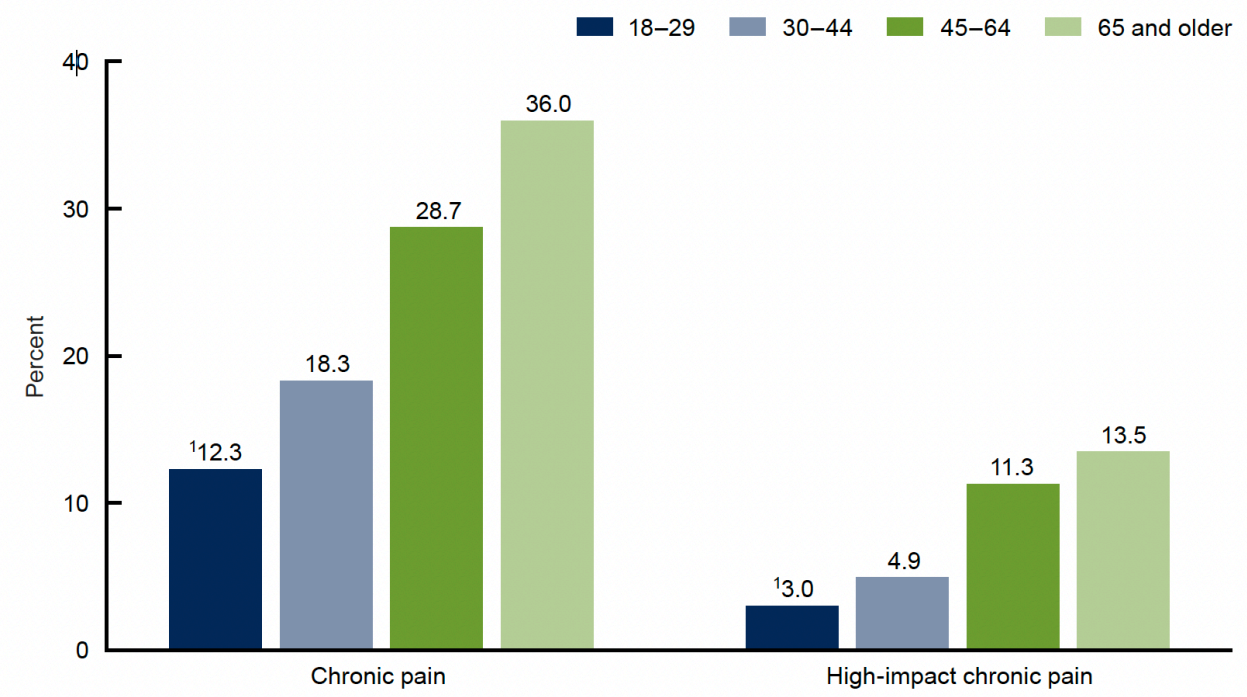
Introduction

Pain (acute and chronic) is a common medical symptom. In the 2023 National Health Interview Survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics at the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 24.3% of U.S. adults had chronic pain (i.e., pain most days or every day in the past 3 months) and 8.5% of adults had high-impact chronic pain (i.e., pain that limits work and life activities on most or all days in the past 3 months).[1] The percentage of adults who have chronic pain increases with age, from 12.3% among those ages 18-29 to 36% among those age 65 and older (Figure 1). Pain can become debilitating and can be associated with significant functional impairment, for example being unable to do household chores or go to work or school.[2]

Figure 1: Percentage of adults with chronic pain and high-impact chronic pain in the past 3 months[1]



[1] Significant linear trend by age group ($p < 0.05$).

Clinicians caring for patients with pain face a daunting set of challenges. As with many other clinical conditions, providers must carefully balance expected benefits of treatment with the potential for harm from such treatments. Such caution is warranted because one of the classes of pain medications—opioids—has been implicated in a surge of overdose-related deaths over the past 20 years—a surge that, fortunately, has shown signs of relenting in recent years.

The U.S. has seen three successive waves of overdose deaths related to both prescribed and non-prescribed opioid drugs.[3] The first began in the 1990s with steadily rising prescriptions for opioid analgesics. In the second wave, beginning in 2010, deaths from heroin overdose began to increase sharply.[4] The third wave began in 2013 with sharply rising overdose deaths attributed to synthetic opioids, particularly those involving illicitly-manufactured fentanyl. Following extensive efforts to curb excessive

opioid prescribing, however, overdose rates involving prescription opioids declined 12% from 2022 to 2023.[5] Nonetheless, in 2023, nearly 80,000 people in the U.S. died of an opioid-related overdose and these agents continue to pose risks for addiction and death.[5]

It is against this background that clinicians must make daily decisions about how best to treat patients who have chronic pain. As detailed in the pivotal 2016 CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain,[6] many non-opioid options exist to safely and effectively treat pain. New non-opioid medications with novel mechanisms are being investigated as additional alternatives, such as suzetrigine (Journavx), which was FDA-approved in 2025 for moderate to severe acute pain of < 14 days.[7] Opioids may still play a time-limited role for the treatment of acute pain, but clinicians are becoming increasingly familiar with the evidence base suggesting that opioids are not very effective for relieving longer-term pain and, in fact, may be associated with *increased* pain and/or reduced functioning.[8,9]

This document discusses the management of pain, with a detailed look at four common chronic pain syndromes accounting for most chronic pain in adults: osteoarthritis, chronic low back pain, diabetic neuropathy, and fibromyalgia. It reviews evidence for non-opioid therapies, including non-pharmacologic and non-opioid medication options. In addition, it reviews current evidence regarding opioid efficacy and harms, overdose prevention with naloxone, and planning an effective opioid dose tapering strategy.

Describing pain

Acute versus chronic pain

Acute pain typically has an abrupt onset due to an obvious cause, such as an injury or other physical process (e.g., a surgical procedure). It has a generally short duration (usually less than four weeks), and improves over time in proportion to tissue or structural healing.[10]

Although pain is expected after injury or surgery, the patient's pain experience can vary markedly. Pain intensity can be influenced by psychological distress (e.g., depression or anxiety), heightened concern or anxiety about an illness, and ineffective strategies to control pain.[11] It may also be shaped by personality, culture, attitudes, and beliefs. For example, injured soldiers who had positive expectations of pain (e.g., evacuation and safe recuperation) requested less analgesic medication than civilians with comparable injuries who had more negative associations with pain (e.g., loss of wages and social hardship).[10]

In contrast, chronic pain is defined as lasting more than three months or past the time of normal tissue healing.[12] It can be the result of an underlying medical disease or condition, inflammation, injury, medical treatment, or an unknown cause. Similar to acute pain, the perception and experience of chronic pain is influenced by patient's psychological state, personality, culture, attitudes, beliefs, and support systems.

Pain mechanisms

Pain can also be classified based on its pathophysiology.

Nociceptive pain is caused by the activation of nociceptors (pain receptors), and is generally, though not always, short-lived, and is associated with underlying physical injury.[13] This is "normal" pain: a physiological response to an injurious stimulus.

Neuropathic pain is pain arising as a direct consequence of a lesion or disease affecting the somatosensory system.[14] It results from nervous system injury or dysfunction. It may be continuous or episodic, and it varies widely in how it is perceived and how it affects daily life and functioning. Neuropathic pain is complex. It can be difficult to manage because available treatment options are limited.

Nociplastic pain arises from altered nociception despite no clear evidence of actual or threatened tissue damage causing the activation of peripheral nociceptors, and no evidence of disease or lesion of the somatosensory system (e.g., fibromyalgia).[15] It replaces previously ill-defined terms like "dysfunctional pain" and "medically unexplained somatic syndromes." Nociplastic pain may occur in combination with other pain conditions.[16]

Related to all forms of pain is the phenomenon of sensitization, which is a state of hyperexcitability in peripheral nociceptors and/or neurons in the central nervous system. Sensitization may lead to either hyperalgesia (heightened pain from a stimulus that normally provokes pain) or allodynia (pain from a stimulus that is not normally painful).[13] Sensitization may arise from intense, repeated, or prolonged stimulation of nociceptors, from the influence of compounds released by the body in response to tissue damage or inflammation, or—importantly—as an adaptation to prolonged exposure to opioid analgesics.[17]

Many patients—particularly those with chronic pain—experience pain that has nociceptive, neuropathic and nociplastic components, which complicates assessment and treatment. Differentiating between the types of pain is critical because different types of pain respond differently to different treatments. Neuropathic pain, for example, responds poorly to both non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID) agents and most opioid analgesics.[18] Other classes of medications, such as membrane stabilizers, antidepressants (e.g., serotonin norepinephrine re-uptake inhibitors), or local anesthetics, may provide more effective relief for neuropathic or nociplastic pain.[16,19]

Assessing pain

Take a history

Assessing pain is critical to effective pain management interventions. Both patient and caregiver reports of pain should be the starting points. Asking the patient *"how is pain affecting everyday life?"* can provide a foundation of understanding patient concerns regarding pain. A comprehensive pain assessment should also include evaluation of the pain quality, duration, location, aggravating or alleviating factors, and any previous treatments (both non-pharmacologic and pharmacologic) and their efficacy. Assessing the impact of pain on sleep and screening for mental health conditions potentially related to pain or treatment adherence (e.g., depression, anxiety, memory loss) provides useful information for management.[20]

Depression, for example, sometimes presents with somatic complaints of pain, particularly in older adults (i.e., adults age 65 and older).[21] Pain complaints may resolve when the underlying depression is treated. Screening for co-occurring depression and anxiety can be facilitated with the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ), either the two-item screen (PHQ-2) or longer 9-item form (PHQ-9), and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) scale, either the two (GAD-2) or seven item (GAD-7) form.

Assessment tools

Multidimensional tools include questions relating to quality of life and participation in daily activities. Such tools can provide a comprehensive approach to assessing pain and response to treatment. The selection of a pain assessment tool must balance the comprehensiveness of the assessment obtained with the time and energy required to use the tool in a real-world practice setting.

PEG scale

The PEG scale (Pain, Enjoyment, and General Activity) is a three-item tool based on the Brief Pain Inventory (BPI) and is used in the initial assessment and follow up of chronic pain in primary care and other ambulatory care clinics. Three 0-to-10 scales are used to assess pain intensity, interference with enjoyment of life, and interference with function. The PEG score is obtained averaging the three questions together. PEG can be self-administered or done by the clinician, and it is relatively brief.[22]

Figure 2: PEG scale[22]

1. **What number best describes your pain on average in the past week?**

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No pain										Pain as bad as you can imagine

2. **What number best describes how, during the past week, pain has interfered with your enjoyment of life?**

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Does not interfere										Completely interferes

3. **What number best describes how, during the past week, pain has interfered with your general activity?**

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Does not interfere										Completely interferes

Brief pain inventory

The BPI is used frequently in randomized controlled trials to assess pain. The BPI more fully captures the impact of pain on patient function and quality of life than simple 0-10 scales.[23] The BPI includes a diagram allowing patients to map the location of their pain and track it through the course of management. Although developed specifically for chronic pain, it can also be useful for assessing acute pain.[24] While the BPI can be conveniently self-administered, it can be time consuming, taking between 5 to 10 minutes to complete, which may limit the role of the BPI in clinical practice.

Initial approaches to assessing pain severity used a visual analog scale (VAS) rating pain from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain you can imagine). Some scales use a 0 to 100 scale. Such scales are often used in clinical trials of pain therapies, and the minimal clinically important difference using these scales is generally considered a 20%-30% change from baseline (i.e., 2-3 points on a 0-10 scale or 20-30 points on a 0-100 scale).[25] Unidimensional assessments like pain scores or VAS ratings of pain do not provide insight into how pain is affecting a patient's life, and they are difficult to interpret from one patient to another.

Assessing pain in patients with cognitive impairment

Although patients with mild-to-moderate dementia can report their pain and its location, those with severe dementia are often unable to communicate their pain experience or request medication. In these patients, clinicians need to observe pain-related behaviors, including facial expressions, verbal cues, body movements, changes in interpersonal interactions, activity patterns, and mental status. Caregiver observations and reports are critical for appropriate assessment and management of chronic pain in these patients.[26]

BOTTOM LINE: Identify the type of pain in order to select the most effective options for treatment. Using a multi-dimensional assessment tool that focuses on quality of life (e.g. PEG) can help establish a baseline and guide treatment decisions.

Overview of options for managing pain

Many pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic approaches to treating pain are available to primary care clinicians. These options should be employed using the following general principles:

- Identify and treat the source of the pain, if possible, although pain treatment can begin before the source of the pain is determined.
- Select the simplest approach to pain management first. This generally means using non-pharmacologic approaches as much as possible and/or trying medications with the least severe potential side effects, and at the lowest effective doses.
- Establish a treatment plan based on functional goals.

Decisions regarding treatment goals and the options selected should be a collaboration between clinicians, who can provide evidence-based recommendations, and the patient's own needs and wishes.

(The following summaries are descriptive only—details about the evidence of effectiveness for each form of therapy will be provided in the condition-specific sections later in this document.)

Non-pharmacologic approaches

Movement-based options

Movement therapies that may be helpful in patients with pain include muscle-strengthening, stretching, and aerobic exercise (e.g., walking, aquatics). Recommended exercise programs typically occur one to three times a week for a total of 60-180 minutes per week; however, any regimen must be carefully tailored to a patient's existing level of physical conditioning, comorbidities, and cognitive status.[27-29] Such therapies may be helpful in the contexts of either acute or chronic pain, with the timing of intervention and the specific motions or maneuvers used tailored to what can be tolerated without causing greater long-term pain or injury.

Additional movement-based options include:

- **Physical therapy** supervised by a licensed physical therapist, which can include resistance, aerobic, balance, and flexibility exercises as well as elements of massage, manipulation, or transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation.
- **Tai chi,** a mind-body practice that combines controlled movements, meditation, and deep breathing. “Chair tai chi” can be an option for patients with limited mobility.
- **Yoga,** exercises or a series of postures designed to align muscle and bones and increase strength and flexibility. It can also relax mind and body through breathing exercises and meditation. Gentler forms of yoga that may be more appropriate for older patients include Iyengar, Hatha, or Viniyoga.

Although these interventions may cause short-term muscle soreness and have a potential to aggravate back pain or incur falls, movement-based options are generally considered safe.[29]

Weight loss

Some pain syndromes, such as knee osteoarthritis, are worsened by obesity. For some patients, pain due to this condition is improved by reducing body weight because of reduced loads and physical stresses on the affected joints. The goal of body weight reduction is a baseline weight loss of 7%-10%.[30] Weight loss may occur with exercise, dietary changes, and/or pharmacologic options. Referral to a comprehensive clinical weight center may be appropriate for some patients, particularly those with a body mass index (BMI) > 35 kg/m^2.[31]

Passive physical options

Acupuncture involves the stimulation of specific points on the body, most often involving skin penetration with fine metallic needles manipulated by hand. It may also include electrical stimulation or low intensity laser therapy. Potential adverse events include minor bruising and bleeding at needle insertion sites.[32]

Massage is the manual manipulation of the body to promote relaxation, reduce stress, and improve well-being. Handheld pulsing or vibratory devices may also provide relief for some patients. Some degree of muscle soreness after massage is normal.[33]

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) uses mild electrical pulses delivered to the skin. The stimulation may block or disrupt pain signals to the brain, reducing pain perception. TENS machines can be used at home or in conjunction with other interventions like physical therapy.

Psychological approaches

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a structured, time-limited (typically 3-10 weeks) intervention focused on how thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions influence pain. It teaches patients to use their minds to control and adapt to pain. This therapy includes setting concrete goals, often with recommendations to increase activity to reduce feelings of helplessness.[34]

Mindfulness elicits the relaxation response and can promote pain relief. Programs typically include a time-limited training (8 weeks; range 3-12 weeks) with group classes with or without home meditation. The objective is to inculcate a long-term practice that helps patients refocus their thoughts on the present, increase awareness of self and surroundings, and reframe experiences.[35,36]

The self-management education program, originally developed for patients with chronic arthritis, has been expanded for application to other chronic diseases, and is generally referred to as the Stanford

model.[37] The elements of Stanford model programs include group meetings, trained leaders (health professionals or lay people), disease management education, goal setting and action plans, and feedback.[38] This is a formally structured program, separate from clinician education to the patient about options to help manage pain at home with non-pharmacological therapies or non-opioid medications.

BOTTOM LINE: Many non-pharmacologic options exist for managing pain, either alone or as adjuncts to pharmacologic therapy. These strategies include movement-based therapies, psychological approaches, acupuncture, and weight loss.

Pharmacologic approaches

Medications used to treat chronic pain include:

- acetaminophen
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
  - oral
  - topical
- antidepressants
  - serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
  - tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs)
- anticonvulsants/membrane stabilizers
- topical lidocaine or capsaicin
- cannabis/cannabinoids
- opioids

Acetaminophen

While its exact mechanism of action is still under investigation, current evidence suggests that acetaminophen provides analgesia by central inhibition of cyclooxygenase (COX) activity plus modulation of serotonergic, endocannabinoid, and transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1) receptors via metabolites.[39] Patients should not exceed 1,000 mg in a single dose. The maximum recommended dose for healthy adults is 4,000 mg/day, although keeping to a maximum of 3,000 mg/day is considered a safer limit.[40] OTC product guidance for healthy adults suggests a maximum dose of 3,000 mg/day and 2,000 mg/day for older patients.[41]

The most severe potential side effect of acetaminophen is liver toxicity. Acetaminophen is the most common cause of acute liver failure, accounting for 46% of all cases.[42] Patients should stay within recommended doses to help prevent side effects and should only take one acetaminophen-containing product at a time. Advise patients to read labels of all medications to determine if the product contains acetaminophen. Patients taking warfarin should be monitored when acetaminophen is started or stopped and with dose changes.

NSAIDs

NSAIDs reduce inflammation by inhibiting COX, either selectively (COX-2 predominantly) or non-selectively (COX-1 and COX-2 effects).

Oral NSAIDs: Short-term use of NSAIDs may be an option for many patients when used at minimally effective doses for < 10 days.[43] Chronic use of NSAIDs, on the other hand, may be limited by gastrointestinal (GI) toxicity, including GI bleeding, upper GI symptoms, ulcers, and related complications. For high-risk patients, including older adults, patients on warfarin or aspirin, and those with coagulopathies, adding a proton pump inhibitor (PPI) may help reduce the risk.[44,45] Acute and chronic use of NSAIDs should be avoided in patients with heart failure (due to fluid retention), and chronic use should be avoiding in patients with a history of gastric bypass (due to increased ulcer risk). In addition to GI side effects, NSAIDs have been associated with an increased risk of renal and cardiac complications.

Evidence regarding the comparative safety of celecoxib:

Some early trials suggested that COX-2 inhibitors, as a class, were associated with higher risks for myocardial infarction and stroke compared to other NSAIDs, and the COX-2 inhibitor rofecoxib (Vioxx) was removed from the market in 2004 because of such concerns.[46] More recent trials and meta-analyses, however, provide strong evidence that the risks of CV events with celecoxib are no greater than those of other NSAIDs, and in 2018 two Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panels recommended that the FDA change its advice to clinicians regarding celecoxib's safety.[47]

The advisory panel's decision was based largely on the Prospective Randomized Evaluation of Celecoxib Integrated Safety vs. Ibuprofen Or Naproxen (**PRECISION**) study, a prospective non-inferiority trial of 24,081 patients comparing celecoxib (100 or 200 mg twice daily, n=8,072) vs. ibuprofen (600 or 800 mg three times daily, n=8,040) or naproxen (375 or 500 mg twice daily, n=7969) in patients with osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis, with established cardiovascular disease or risk factors for cardiovascular disease.[48]

After a mean follow-up of 20 months, a primary outcome event (composite of CV death, nonfatal myocardial infarction, or nonfatal stroke) occurred in 188 patients in the celecoxib group (2.3%), 201 patients in the naproxen group (2.5%), and 218 patients in the ibuprofen group (2.7%) (P<0.001 for noninferiority for both comparisons). The risk of renal events was significantly lower with celecoxib than with ibuprofen (P=0.004) but was not significantly lower with celecoxib compared with naproxen (P=0.19). The risk of GI events was significantly lower with celecoxib than with naproxen (P=0.01) or ibuprofen (P=0.002). Notably, all patients in PRECISION received a proton pump inhibitor (PPI); a PPI is recommended regardless of the NSAID selected, especially for patients at increased risk for GI side effects.[48]

Topical NSAIDs: Side effects from NSAIDs are typically lower with topical formulations. For example, in a small clinical trial of the NSAID diclofenac, comparing delivery via a transdermal patch vs. a pill, the incidence of gastroduodenal ulcers and/or erosions was 86.2% in the pill group compared to 26.7% in the patch group.[49] The effects of topical NSAIDs on coagulation and renal function are unknown, but likely not clinically significant given limited systemic absorption.[50] [49]

Serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors

SNRIs such as duloxetine, venlafaxine, and milnacipran are characterized by a mixed action on norepinephrine and serotonin, though their exact mechanism of action for pain reduction is unknown. Side effects (e.g., nausea, dizziness, and somnolence) are self-limiting, typically resolving in around two weeks. Monitoring is required for blood pressure (duloxetine and venlafaxine), heart rate (venlafaxine), and drug interactions (duloxetine and venlafaxine).

Tricyclic antidepressants

TCAs inhibit reuptake of norepinephrine and serotonin, but their mechanism of action for pain relief is unknown. Examples of TCAs studied for the management of chronic pain include amitriptyline, desipramine, and nortriptyline. In older adults, side effects, such as anticholinergic effects (e.g., dry mouth, constipation, dizziness) and QTc prolongation, limit the use of TCAs. Secondary amines (i.e., nortriptyline) tend to be better tolerated than tertiary amines (i.e., amitriptyline). The majority of side effects are dose dependent. Doses used for pain are much lower than those used for depression.

Membrane stabilizers

Membrane stabilizers (i.e., anticonvulsants), such as gabapentin, pregabalin, topiramate, oxcarbazepine, and carbamazepine, are thought to exert their analgesic effect by inhibiting neuronal sodium or calcium channels. Potential side effects include sedation, dizziness, and peripheral edema. While many membrane stabilizers are used off-label for the treatment of pain, pregabalin is FDA approved for fibromyalgia, diabetic peripheral neuropathy, postherpetic neuralgia, and neuropathy associated with spinal cord injury. Gabapentin is FDA approved for postherpetic neuralgia. Oxcarbazepine and carbamazepine are rarely used for chronic pain management due to their side effect profile and drug interactions. Topiramate may be considered in patients who desire weight loss. It requires slow titration and close monitoring.

Safety: In December 2019, the FDA issued a warning for gabapentinoids (i.e., gabapentin and pregabalin); they were reported to cause respiratory depression, particularly when co-administered with other central nervous system (CNS) depressants, such as opioids, in the setting of underlying respiratory impairment, or in the elderly.[51] A cohort study of patients who received perioperative gabapentinoids with opioids compared to those receiving opioids alone found an increased risk of overdose with the combination of a gabapentinoid and opioid vs. an opioid alone, though the rates were low (1.4 per 10,000 patients and 0.7 per 10,000 patients respectively).[52] Two case-control studies, nested with a cohort of patients receiving prescription opioids, identified an increased risk of opioid overdose death when pregabalin or gabapentin were co-prescribed with opioids.[53,54]

In patients receiving any dose of pregabalin and also opioids, the risk of overdose death was significantly higher than in patients on opioid prescription alone (adjusted OR 1.68; 95% CI: 1.19-2.36).[53] A similar increase in overdose mortality was found in another study of patients on opioids and gabapentin (adjusted OR 1.49; 95% CI: 1.18-1.88) vs. opioid prescription alone.[54] In both studies, the prescription of combination therapy to patients at higher risk of opioid misuse or abuse, cannot be excluded. Case reports in the literature as well as 49 cases reported to the FDA Adverse Event Reporting System (FAERS) database, of which 12 resulted in death, identify an increased risk of respiratory depression in patients who have underlying respiratory impairment or who are co-prescribed other CNS depressants, such as opioids or benzodiazepines.[51]

Changes in opioid prescribing led to an increase in gabapentin prescribing from 1.5 million episodes in 2006 to 8.1 million episodes in 2018.[55] An increase in the proportion of opioid and gabapentin co-prescribing rose from 1.9% to 7.6% during the same period. The majority of these prescriptions were written by pain management specialists, and were written for women, non-Hispanic white patients, patients over age 65, people in rural counties, and patients living in counties with the highest quartile of poverty.[55]

While concern for respiratory depression has been noted for gabapentinoids, increasing doses of opioids in order to stop use of gabapentinoids is not recommended. Evidence supporting the risk of serious breathing difficulties with gabapentinoids alone in otherwise healthy individuals is lacking.[51] For most patients, careful management can reduce the risk of respiratory depression, especially in those who are co-prescribed other CNS depressants, the elderly, those with renal dysfunction, and with underlying respiratory insufficiency. These management steps include:

- Start at the lowest dose and slowly titrate doses
- Monitor patients for symptoms of respiratory depression or sedation
- Adjust gabapentin and pregabalin doses for renal impairment
- Counsel patients about the risks of gabapentinoid respiratory suppression, especially when combined with opioids
- Prescribe naloxone in patients co-prescribed opioids

Gabapentinoids have been associated with increased risk of COPD exacerbations and should be used with caution in patients with COPD. Multiple large population-based cohort studies demonstrate a 35-43% increased risk of severe COPD exacerbations requiring hospitalization or systemic corticosteroids among gabapentinoid users compared to nonusers.[56-58]

Pregabalin and gabapentin may have abuse potential in the general population, although the actual prevalence is poorly understood. According to one survey, nearly 20% of the U.S. population reported use of a gabapentinoid - with responses from 6.6% of the population suggesting misuse, abuse or non-prescription use.[59] Misuse and abuse were reported in as many as 1 in 3 gabapentinoid users. Those reporting misuse were younger, male, employed, had a higher income (>$100,000), but also reported prior incarceration, substance use disorder, and prior addiction treatment.[59] Because of the risk of misuse or addiction, pregabalin is currently classified as Schedule V by the DEA, and prescriptions for gabapentin are tracked by some state Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs).

A sometimes-overlooked potential adverse effect of gabapentinoids is peripheral edema, which is experienced by 7%-10% of patients.[60] But loop diuretics, which are commonly used to treat edema, have a range of potential side effects as well, such as worsening kidney function and orthostasis. Greater clinician awareness of this “prescribing cascade” could help prevent hospitalizations and/or morbidity.[61]

Topical lidocaine and capsaicin

Topical lidocaine inhibits ionic fluxes required for initiation and conduction of nerve impulses. Irritation at the application site is the most common side effect. The most common products for chronic pain management are lidocaine 5% patches (available by prescription) and lidocaine 4% patches (available over the counter (OTC)).

Capsaicin is an active component of chili peppers and has moderate analgesic properties at 8% concentrations for musculoskeletal and neuropathic pain (capsaicin formulations with <8% are available OTC).[62] The most common side effect is a mild-to-severe burning sensation at the application site.

Cannabinoid preparations

As of early 2026, cannabis is legal for medical use in about 40 U.S. states and for adult use in 24 states, plus the District of Columbia in both categories.[63] Cannabis contains more than 60 cannabinoids, with Δ^9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) being the two of primary interest to patients and

clinicians. Exogenous cannabinoids act on cannabinoid receptors located throughout the body, primarily in the brain and spinal cord, to inhibit release of multiple neurotransmitters (e.g., acetylcholine, dopamine, and glutamate) with indirect effects on opioid, serotonin, and other receptors. Activation of cannabinoid receptors can reduce pain. Some exogenous cannabinoids also function as an antiemetic and have anti-spasticity and sleep-promoting effects.[64] Cannabinoids may also cause side effects of euphoria, psychosis, cognitive impairment, reduced locomotor function, and increased appetite.

A variety of doses, routes of administration, and ratios of THC/CBD are available, with the most common presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Common cannabinoid-based preparations[65]

Preparation	Route	Potency
whole-plant cannabis bud, leaf, weed	smoked or vaporized orally if cooked into food or butters	Can be THC 20+% from dispensaries
synthetic cannabinoids (primarily THC and CBD)	vaporized, sublingual tinctures, pills/capsules, and topical creams oral FDA approved options: dronabinol, nabilone, Epidiolex,	often expressed as a ratio of THC:CBD
concentrates (wax, shatter, dab, butane honey oil)	smoked or vaporized	extremely high potency, THC often >90%
edibles (brownies, candies, mints, muffins, beverages)	oral ingestion	usually ≤10 mg of THC per 'serving'

Edibles require extra caution as they can look like common food products and may be ingested by children and other adults. Patients need to understand the time to onset of effect is longer with edibles than other products. Ingesting another serving too soon may result in an unintentional overdose.

The effects of dose and THC/CBD ratios were explored in a 2025 meta-analysis of 25 trials (N=2,303).[66] High-dose THC products, or products with high THC-to-CBD ratios, were found to slightly reduce pain severity (pooled differences, -0.78 points on a 0-10 scale; 95% CI -1.59 to -0.08 points) whereas low-dose THC products or those with low THC-to-CBD preparations did not show significant analgesic effects.

An earlier systematic review of both randomized trials (47) and observational studies (57) in patients with chronic non-cancer pain (across multiple pain conditions) published through July 2017 found moderate evidence that cannabinoids can relieve pain.[67] Across RCTs, the overall number needed to treat to obtain a 30% reduction in pain was relatively high (NNT 24; 95% CI: 15-61), while the number needed to harm (NNH) for all-cause adverse events was 6 (95% CI: 5-8). Another review found small but not statistically different pain relief across a variety of chronic pain conditions vs. placebo (37% vs. 31%; OR 1.41; 95% CI: 0.99-2.00). Side effects were three times more common in the cannabis group vs. placebo (OR 3.03; 95% CI: 2.42-3.80).[68] The substances studied were smoked cannabis and nabiximols, which are not available in the U.S. The role of cannabinoids in treatment was summarized in a 2026 review,[69] the conclusions of which mirror an earlier report by the National Academy of Medicine that stated:[70]

> *"While the use of cannabis for the treatment of pain is supported by well-controlled clinical trials, very little is known about the efficacy, dose, routes of administration, or side effects of commonly used and commercially available cannabis products in the United States. Given the ubiquitous availability of cannabis products… more research is needed on the various forms, routes of administration, and combination of cannabinoids"*

Cannabis preparations, particularly high-dose THC products, may pose both short-term and long-term risks. Short-term effects include dizziness, sedation, nausea, impaired memory, motor coordination, and judgment. Products containing only CBD may not pose these risks, although they may also be ineffective for pain.[66] Paranoid ideation and psychotic symptoms, while rare, may occur with high doses of THC. Possible long-term effects include impaired brain development in young adults, potential for habituation, and increased risk of anxiety or depression. Abrupt cessation of cannabis in long-term users may cause withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, irritability, craving, dysphoria, and insomnia. There is an increased risk of chronic bronchitis, respiratory infections, and pneumonia with inhaled products.[64,70]

No FDA approved cannabinoid products are indicated for the treatment of acute or chronic pain.

These research findings do not apply to hemp-derived cannabis products, such as CBD oil, found at gas stations, convenience stores, and smoke or vape shops. These products may be available regardless of whether or not a state has legalized medical or recreational cannabis products. Few safeguards exist to ensure product quality, safety (e.g., prevention of the use of toxins or heavy metals in the synthesis process), or appropriate marketing. In many cases products are designed to attract youth, with no minimum age to buy these products, and they are sold alongside tobacco and alcohol.[71]

BOTTOM LINE: Many non-opioid analgesic medications exist for treating pain, and these should generally be explored before initiating a trial of an opioid.

Opioids for pain

Mechanism of action

Opioids exert their analgesic effects by acting on the mu, kappa, and delta opioid receptors. Individual agents may be classified as agonists, partial agonists, or antagonists of those receptors:[72]

- Agonists (e.g., morphine, codeine, hydromorphone, hydrocodone) stimulate at least one of the opioid receptors and provide continued analgesia with increasing doses.
- Partial agonists (e.g., buprenorphine) have high affinity but lower activity at mu-receptors, are less likely to cause respiratory depression due to a ceiling effect, and do not have a defined ceiling on analgesic effect.
- Antagonists (e.g., naloxone and naltrexone) block opioid receptors and do not have an analgesic effect. Use of an opioid antagonist in patients taking chronic opioids will precipitate an acute withdrawal syndrome.

Opioids are classified by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) according to their presumed abuse and addiction potential, although the evidence base for making these differentiations continues to evolve. Tramadol, for example, is now known to have a higher abuse potential than previously thought.[73]

Table 2: Opioids by schedule[72]

Schedule*	Description	Opioid (examples)
Schedule I	No medical use, lack of accepted safety, and a high potential for abuse	Heroin
Schedule II	High potential for abuse, which may lead to physical or psychological dependence	Hydrocodone Oxycodone Morphine Hydromorphone Tapentadol Methadone Fentanyl
Schedule III	Less potential for abuse than schedules I and II, low to moderate physical dependence and high psychological dependence	Buprenorphine Codeine + acetaminophen
Schedule IV	Lower potential for abuse than schedule III medications	Tramadol
*Note: DEA schedules may not accurately reflect the actual abuse or dependence potential for these medications.		

Relative effectiveness

The analgesic efficacy of opioids for treating acute pain has been known for centuries, and opioids continue to be reliable—if potentially risky—agents for moderate-to-severe acute pain. The efficacy appears to wane by three months.[74] The evidence for opioid efficacy for acute pain cannot be extended to chronic pain. Neuronal and physiologic adaptations to long-term opioid use can result in reduced analgesic effectiveness, or even, paradoxically, increased pain or sensitivity to pain.[17] These neuroadaptations go beyond mere receptor desensitization (which may be easily reversed) to more enduring processes involving brain areas that regulate motivation, affect, reward and stress responses.[75] Opioid-induced neuroadaptations explain why opioids do not provide good long-term analgesia and why dose escalation ultimately worsens pain and comorbid conditions.[75,76]

For chronic pain, the evidence that opioids reduce pain and improve function more than placebo is surprisingly weak. A 2018 systematic review and meta-analysis of 96 trials comparing various opioids vs. placebo or non-opioid analgesics in 26,169 patients with chronic non-cancer pain found that opioids may slightly reduce pain and increase physical functioning compared to placebo, but not compared to non-opioids.[8] In 76 trials comparing opioids vs. placebo with median follow-up of 60 days (range 30-84 days), the reduction in pain scores with opioids (on a 10-point scale) was only 0.69 points, which is below the generally-accepted minimum clinically important difference for pain. Physical function scores (on a 100-point scale) improved with opioids by 2.04 points, which, again, may not be clinically important. The risk of vomiting with opioids, however, was more than four times higher than with placebo (RR 4.12; 95% CI: 3.34-5.07).[8] In these studies, there were no significant differences in emotional functioning or role functioning.

The same meta-analysis compared opioids to non-opioid analgesics including NSAIDs, TCAs, membrane stabilizers, and synthetic cannabinoids. No significant differences were found in physical functioning

scores for any of the comparisons, and no significant differences were found in pain scores for comparisons with NSAIDs (9 trials), TCAs (3 trials), or cannabinoids (1 trial). As compared to membrane stabilizers, opioids were associated with slightly lower pain scores, although the confidence interval includes differences that may not be clinically significant (weighted mean difference -0.9 points; 95% CI: -1.65 points to -0.14 points).[8]

The Strategies for Prescribing Analgesics Comparative Effectiveness **(SPACE) trial** randomized 240 patients with moderate to severe chronic low back pain or knee or hip osteoarthritis to regimens of morphine, oxycodone, or hydrocodone, or non-opioid analgesics (e.g., acetaminophen, NSAIDs, antidepressants, membrane stabilizers) and followed them for one year.[9] The primary outcome was score for pain-related functioning using the 0-10 BPI scale (lower score indicates better function). At 3, 6, 9, and 12 months there were no significant differences in BPI scores (overall P=0.58). At one year, pain intensity was significantly better in the non-opioid group (P=0.03). No differences in treatment response were seen in analyses by pain condition. The authors concluded that their results "do not support initiation of opioid therapy for moderate-to-severe chronic back pain or hip or knee osteoarthritis pain."[9]

Opioid formulations

Prescription opioids are available in immediate-release and extended-release/long-acting (ER/LA) formulations. Immediate-release agents are recommended in opioid-naïve patients and for all acute pain conditions, with ER/LA agents reserved for patients or conditions in which the longer duration of action (and, hence, less frequent dosing) are preferred.[77] A trial comparing immediate release to an ER/LA opioid did not find evidence that the continuous, time-scheduled use of ER/LA opioids was more effective or safer than intermittent use of the immediate-release opioid.[78] According to the FDA, ER/LA opioids should only be used for patients who tolerate 60 morphine milligram equivalents (MME) per day for at least one week.[74,79]

Efforts to create formulations with lower risks of abuse have met with limited success. For example, Opana ER (oxymorphone) was removed from the market after reports of intravenous abuse of the oral formulation.[80] Abuse-deterrent or tamper-resistant formulations do not prevent users from taking too much of an opioid by mouth (the most common route for abuse) or becoming addicted.[81,82] No prospective randomized clinical trials or rigorous observational studies have measured the impact of abuse-deterrent opioids on the risk of abuse or misuse. As of February, 2026, four opioids FDA-approved as abuse-deterrent formations are available: OxyContin (oxycodone), Hysingla ER (hydrocodone), Xtampza ER (oxycodone), and RoxyBond (oxycodone).[83,84]

Opioid risks and side effects

To ensure clear communication regarding medical issues and avoid misunderstandings about the nature and risk of addiction, the CDC provides the following definitions:[85]

- **Tolerance** – The need for an increased dose of an opioid to achieve the same effect, which can occur even when taking a medication as prescribed
- **Physiologic dependence** - A state of physical adaptation that is manifested by a substance class-specific withdrawal syndrome that can be produced by abrupt cessation, rapid dose reduction, decreasing blood level of the substance, and/or administration of an antagonist.
- **Misuse** - Use of a medication other than as directed or as indicated, such as taking in greater amounts, more often, or for a longer duration, or using someone else's prescription.

- **Opioid use disorder or addiction** - Problematic opioid use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, with at least two additional criteria, such as taking more opioids or for longer than prescribed, persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control opioid use and craving or a strong desire or urge to use opioids, occurring within a 12-month period.[86]

Problematic opioid use

Although evidence for the long-term effectiveness of opioids for chronic pain is weak, evidence for opioid-related harms is abundant and strong.

In a 2007 study assessing behaviors indicative of opioid misuse, many patients in primary care practices reported having engaged in aberrant behaviors one or more times.[87]

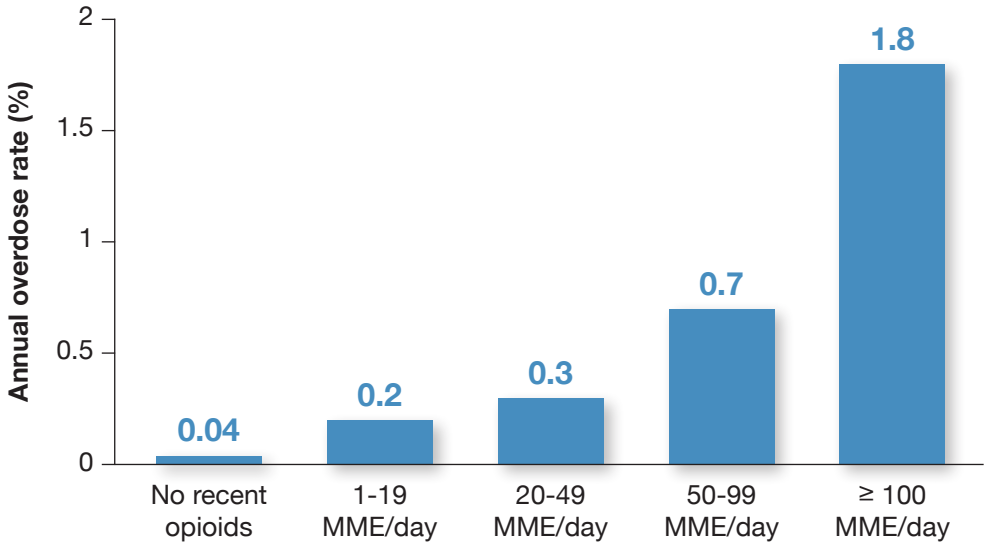
Table 3: Behaviors indicative of opioid misuse[87]

Behavior	Frequency in patients with opioid misuse
requested early refills	47%
increased dose on own	39%
felt intoxicated from pain medication	35%
purposely over sedated oneself	26%
used opioids for purpose other than pain	18%

A 2015 meta-analysis showed that the prevalence of opioid misuse among patients with chronic pain in primary care settings ranged from 0.6%-8%, and the prevalence of physiologic dependence ranged from 3%-26%.[88] In pain clinics, the prevalence of opioid misuse ranged from 8%-16%, and addiction ranged from 2%-14%.[88]

For prescription opioids, long-term therapy is associated with an increased risk in accidental overdose and death. A retrospective study including 9,940 patients who received three or more opioid prescriptions within 90 days for chronic pain between 1997 and 2005 found that annual overdose rates rose significantly as doses exceeded 50 MME per day.[89]

Figure 3: Risk of overdose rises with MME dose per day[89]



Combining opioids with sedating substances such as benzodiazepines or alcohol increases the risk of respiratory depression and overdose death.[77] Benzodiazepines have been linked with overdose fatalities in 50-80% of heroin overdoses, and 40-80% of methadone-related deaths.[77,90] Patients on benzodiazepines who are being initiated on opioids for pain should have their benzodiazepine tapered and discontinued whenever possible, although complete cessation of a benzodiazepine may not be needed with careful medication management.[91] For patients being co-managed by mental health professionals, a plan should be coordinated regarding continuing or tapering benzodiazepines in the setting of opioid co-prescribing. (Note: in its 2016 warning about the hazards of combining CNS depressants with opioids, the FDA included the benzodiazepine-like insomnia medications: eszopiclone, zaleplon, and zolpidem [so-called "z-drugs"], muscle relaxants and antipsychotics such as aripiprazole, olanzapine, and quetiapine.)[92]

Other adverse events

In addition to risks of misuse, addiction, respiratory depression, and overdose death, there are many well-known side effects associated with chronic opioid use that can significantly compromise quality of life, including constipation, nausea or vomiting, sedation, pruritus, erectile dysfunction, fracture, immunosuppression, hallucinations, and hyperalgesia.[93]

Gastrointestinal side effects

Constipation is one of the most common opioid-related adverse events, affecting most patients to at least some degree, and which usually does not resolve with continued use.[12] To mitigate this side effect, patients should use a mild stimulant laxative such as senna or bisacodyl and increase the dosage in 48 hours if no bowel movement occurs. Clinicians should perform a rectal examination if no bowel movement occurs in 72 hours. If there is no impaction, consider other therapies such as an enema, suppository, polyethylene glycol, lactulose, or magnesium citrate.[94] Because fiber is a bulking agent that does not affect colonic motility, it is of limited benefit in opioid-induced constipation.[95]

Medications for refractory, opioid-induced constipation include naloxone derivatives:

- naloxegol (Movantik) orally
- methylnaltrexone (Relistor) subcutaneous injection or oral tablet used daily
- naldemedine (Symproic) orally

Coverage of these naloxone derivatives varies between insurance carriers and may require a prior authorization in some cases.

Another option is a chloride channel activator, lubiprostone (Amitiza). An oral capsule (24 mcg) given twice daily, it increases secretion of fluid in the intestine to help stool pass through the gut.[96]

For **nausea or vomiting**, clinicians should consider a prophylactic antiemetic, add or increase non-opioid pain control agents (e.g., acetaminophen), and decrease opioid dose by 25% if analgesia is satisfactory.

Sedation

If a patient or caregiver complains of sedation, determine whether sedation is related to the opioid, eliminate nonessential depressants (such as benzodiazepines or alcohol), reduce dose by 10%-15% if analgesia is satisfactory, add or increase non-opioid or non-sedating adjuvant for additional pain to facilitate reducing opioid dose. There is insufficient evidence to recommend opioid rotation as a possible means of reducing sedation.[77]

Fracture

A retrospective cohort study over seven years compared the risk of fracture associated with starting opioids vs. NSAIDs (2,436 patients initiated on opioids and 4,874 initiated on NSAIDs: mean age 81, 85% female). Opioids significantly increased the risk of fracture (hazard ratio [HR] 4.9; 95% CI: 3.5-6.9) in a dose-dependent fashion. The opioid formulation mattered, with much of the risk in the first month after initiation for short-acting opioids, though fracture increased for both long- and short-acting opioids over time.[97]

A systematic review and meta-analysis of 30 studies analyzed the risk of fall, fall injury and fracture with opioid use older adults and found a small but statistically significant increase in falls (standardized mean difference [SMD] 0.15; 95% CI: 0.02-0.27). Adults ages 65 and over were significantly more likely to have a fall related injury (SMD 0.40; 95% CI: 0.24-0.56) and fracture (SMD 0.71; 95% CI: 0.45-0.97).[98]

Infection

Opioids may increase risk of infection in older adults. A case-control study of 3,061 older community dwelling adults ages 64-95 years evaluated the association between pneumonia and opioid use. Current prescription opioid users had a 38% greater risk of pneumonia (OR 1.38; 95% CI: 1.08-1.76) compared with nonusers. The risk was highest for opioid users categorized as being immunosuppressed, such as those with cancer, recent cancer treatment, or chronic kidney disease, or those receiving immunosuppressive medications or medications for HIV.[99]

Among a national cohort of 5,623 people with Alzheimer's disease (AD), use of opioid medications was associated with a 34% increase in the risk of hospital-treated pneumonia compared to not receiving opioids (95% CI: 1.14-1.57). Risk was greatest in the first two months of use (adjusted hazard ratio [aHR] 2.58; 95% CI: 1.87-3.55) and with more potent opioids (aHR 1.84; 95% CI: 1.15-2.97). Higher doses, such as ≥50 MME per day doubled the risk of hospitalization compared to opioid use <50 MME per day (aHR 2.03; 95% CI: 1.24-3.31).[100] Although not clearly understood, reasons for the increase in pneumonia

have been attributed to direct immunosuppressive effects of specific opioids (e.g., fentanyl, morphine) and suppression of cough and respirations.[101]

Myocardial infarction

A case-control study assessed the risk of myocardial infarction (MI) among adults on opioids for chronic pain in the UK General Practice Research Database (11,693 cases with up to four matched controls). Current opioid use was associated with a 28% increased risk of MI compared to non-use (HR 1.28; 95% CI: 1.19-1.37).[102] A 2025 meta-analysis of 17 studies (N=1,676,00) evaluating the risk of cardiovascular events in patients with long-term opioid use found a pooled odds ratio (OR) of 1.74 (95% CI: 1.12-2.70).[103] For ischemic heart disease specifically, the risk was similar (OR 1.51; 95% CI: 1.40-1.63).

Erectile dysfunction

Chronic opioid use is a known cause of hypogonadism and associated problems such as low libido and erectile dysfunction (ED). In a meta-analysis of 15 studies (N=3250) assessing the effects of opioid use on pituitary function, the prevalence of hypogonadism was 63% (95% CI: 55%-70%).[104] In a cross-sectional analysis of 11,327 men with back pain, long-term opioid use was associated with greater use of ED medications or testosterone replacement compared to patients with no opioid use (OR 1.45; 95% CI: 1.12-1.87). Men prescribed daily doses of 120 mg morphine or more had a 1.58-fold increase in medication for ED or testosterone compared to patients without opioid use, suggesting that dose and duration of opioid use were associated with ED.[105]

Opioid-induced hyperalgesia

The phenomenon of opioid-induced hyperalgesia is increasingly recognized, and is described as the clinical experience in which exposure to opioids (prescribed nor non-prescribed) makes a patient more sensitive to pain so that pain worsens or spreads despite ongoing or escalating opioid therapy.[106] Although the mechanisms of opioid-induced hyperalgesia remain under investigation, clinicians should be aware of this possibility and, if signs are detected, either taper the existing opioid, switch to a partial-agonist such as buprenorphine, or switch to (or return to) non-opioid pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic options.[107]

Differentiating between opioids

Tramadol

Tramadol is a partial mu-opioid receptor agonist and a reuptake inhibitor of the noradrenergic and serotonergic system. Its analgesic effects are similar to morphine, although it is only one-fifth to one-tenth as potent as morphine.[108] Patients taking tramadol should be monitored for nausea, vomiting, constipation, and drowsiness, all of which are similar to side effects with opioids.[109] There is potential risk of serotonin syndrome when combined with serotonergic drugs such as SSRIs and tricyclic antidepressants.[110] Tramadol may also lower the seizure threshold.

Tramadol is classified as Schedule IV (which is lower than most opioids), but it still can be misused. The 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 1.2 million people in the U.S. aged >12 years reported misusing tramadol products (e.g., Ultram, Ultram ER, Ultracet, generics) in the previous year.[111] In addition, a 2019 cohort study of 88,902 patients with osteoarthritis (mean age 70 years) showed increased risks of death with tramadol use at one year compared to the NSAIDs naproxen (HR 1.7; 95%

CI: 1.4-2.1), diclofenac (HR 1.9; 95% CI: 1.5-2.6), and celecoxib (HR 1.7; 95% CI: 1.3-2.2), although it is possible that patients receiving tramadol were at higher risk of death due to underlying comorbidities.[112] In that study, the hazard ratio for death at one year was not significantly different between tramadol and codeine (HR 0.94; 95% CI: 0.83-1.10). Compared to other opioids, the risk of overdose is lower at FDA approved doses. Maximum daily dose is 400 mg per day,[113] while a median dose of 2,500 mg was ingested when respiratory depression occurred due to tramadol alone.[114]

Abrupt cessation of tramadol is associated with withdrawal symptoms similar to those associated with other opioids (such as flu-like symptoms, restlessness, and substance cravings) as well as symptoms likely related to its noradrenergic and serotonergic activity (such as hallucinations, paranoia, extreme anxiety, panic attacks, confusion, and numbness/tingling in extremities).[115]

Tapentadol

Tapentadol (Nucynta, generics) is an opioid with a mechanism of action similar to tramadol, and it has potency and side effect profiles similar to other common opioids such as oxycodone. It is FDA approved for treating neuropathic pain and should be limited to situations when a potent mu opioid with noradrenergic and serotonergic activity is required (i.e., pain with neuropathic components).[116]

Buprenorphine

An atypical opioid with unique pharmacology, buprenorphine has advantages over full agonist opioids, such as oxycodone. It is a partial agonist with high binding affinity at the mu receptor, which provides analgesia while having a ceiling effect on respiratory depression.[117,118] Buprenorphine also has higher potency and exhibits a slow dissociation rate compared to full agonist opioids, allowing for effective and long-lasting analgesia.[118] An antagonist at the kappa opioid receptors, buprenorphine may also improve mood and reduce tolerance.[119]

Buprenorphine formulations prescribed differ by indication. FDA approved formulations for pain severe enough to require daily, around-the-clock, long-term opioid treatment include buccal film (Belbuca) and transdermal system (Butrans, generics). Transdermal and buccal delivery provide analgesia for patients who may not have optimal absorption orally, such as in patients with gastric bypass. Both the buccal and transdermal products are dosed in micrograms, which differs from buprenorphine's higher strength sublingual formulations (which are dosed in milligrams). See Table 4 (next page). Buprenorphine's sublingual formulations (e.g. Subutex, Suboxone, Zubsolv, generics) are FDA approved for treatment of opioid use disorder, but may be used off-label for treatment of chronic pain.[120] Sublingual buprenorphine is available both as the monoproduct (Subutex, generics) and in a co-formulation with naloxone (Suboxone, Zubsolv, generics). To learn more about the treatment of OUD, visit AlosaHealth.org/OUD.

Table 4: Initial dosing and titration of buprenorphine for pain[121,122]

	Transdermal buprenorphine (Butrans)	Buccal film (Belbuca)
initial dosing	5 mcg/hour patch	75 mcg film once daily or every 12 hours, as tolerated
titration frequency	no sooner than every 72 hours	no sooner than every 4 days
titration dose	based on analgesic response and side effects	from 75 mcg every 12 hours, increase to 150 mcg every 12 hours from 150 mcg every 12 hours, increase by 150 mcg increments every 12 hours
maximum dose	20 mcg/hour	900 mcg every 12 hours

Safety concerns for buprenorphine at initiation are similar to other opioids. Common complaints are nausea, vomiting, constipation, dizziness, and headache. One review suggests buccal buprenorphine is less likely to have these adverse effects than full agonist opioids.[123] Buprenorphine may also be used in opioid-experienced patients. In these patients, the transition from full agonist opioid to buprenorphine causes risk of precipitated withdrawal. Precipitated withdrawal occurs due to buprenorphine's high affinity for mu receptors that displaces full agonist opioids, causing withdrawal. (Switching from a full agonist opioid to buprenorphine is discussed on page 33.) The two formulations FDA approved for pain, buprenorphine transdermal patch and buccal film, are less likely to cause precipitated withdrawal than the formulations used for OUD because their relatively lower doses result in less displacement of the full agonist opioids.

Buprenorphine may be more favorable for the management of chronic pain as compared to a full agonist opioid in selected patients for the following reasons:[120]

- ease of ordering by clinicians
  - option for refills
- favorable therapeutic index and safety profile when used as directed
- ceiling effect on respiratory depression
- can be used to treat chronic pain in patients both with and without OUD

Who may benefit from buprenorphine?[120]

- patient characteristics that increase the risk of life-threatening opioid-related adverse events:
  - high BMI
  - obstructive sleep apnea
  - co-occurring psychiatric diagnosis
  - pulmonary disease
  - concomitant use of substances known to increase risk (e.g., benzodiazepines, gabapentin, pregabalin, muscle relaxants, alcohol)
  - taking high MME per day
- patients who are CYP2D6 poor or rapid metabolizers and are unable to take medications such as tramadol or codeine due to increased risk of increased toxicity or lack of effectiveness
- patients with a history of substance/opioid use disorder

Note: when used for the treatment of OUD or in patients with overlapping OUD and chronic pain, high dose buprenorphine (i.e., sublingual OUD treatment formulations) should be used in divided doses.

BOTTOM LINE: Opioid analgesics, while effective in the short term, provide diminishing returns in the long-term, and increase risks for side effects such as constipation, infection, overdose, and addiction. Tramadol and buprenorphine may be safer alternatives to full-agonist opioids.

Developing a pain management strategy

A central tenet of pain management, whether acute or chronic, is that the goal of treatment is not necessarily to eliminate pain, but rather to permit maximum physical and emotional functioning with the lowest risk of side effects, progression to chronic pain, or medication misuse or addiction.[124] A commonly-recommended way to achieve functional goals is with multimodal analgesia, in which several therapeutic approaches are used, each acting at different sites of the pain pathway, which can reduce dependence on a single medication and may reduce or eliminate the need for opioids and associated risks/side effects.[125]

Setting functional goals

Tracking treatment requires the establishment of a goal. For patients with pain, these goals should be life activities of importance to the individual patient. These goals can vary for each patient based on their current limitations, what can be expected after treatment for their given pain condition, and what is important to them in life. Example goals could be walking from bed to the living room, gardening, or going out to dinner with friends. These goals create a guide for when changes to the pain management strategy are needed.

Managing patient expectations

Patients in pain are understandably worried that the pain will persist or get worse with time. Clinicians can reduce such fears and set realistic expectations for treatment effectiveness and healing with clear, compassionate communication couched in terms that patients can easily understand. It can be helpful, for example, to tell patients that most forms of acute nociceptive pain (e.g., nonspecific low back pain) are self-limited, subside within weeks, and do not require invasive interventions. (In a systematic review of 15 prospective cohort studies, 82% of people who stopped work due to acute low back pain returned to work within one month.[126]). An example of appropriate expectation-setting language is: “Some pain is normal. You should be able to walk and do light activity but may be sore for a few days. This will gradually get better.”[127]

A systematic review of 14 controlled trials of patient education interventions for acute low back pain showed that compared with usual care/control education, structured messaging by providers can reassure patients with acute pain in both the short and long term.[128] Messaging was significantly more reassuring to patients when delivered by physicians than other primary care practitioners, and such communication reduced the frequency of primary care visits.

Examples of effective messaging specific to patients with low back pain include:

- “Based on the history and exam, you have a good prognosis.”
- “The acute pain you are experiencing is not the result of serious injury and is likely to resolve without need for x-rays or invasive treatments.”
- “Avoid bed-rest…daily exercise is helpful.”

For patients who have chronic pain, education about the condition increases understanding of what various treatment strategies can or cannot accomplish.

Addressing mental health

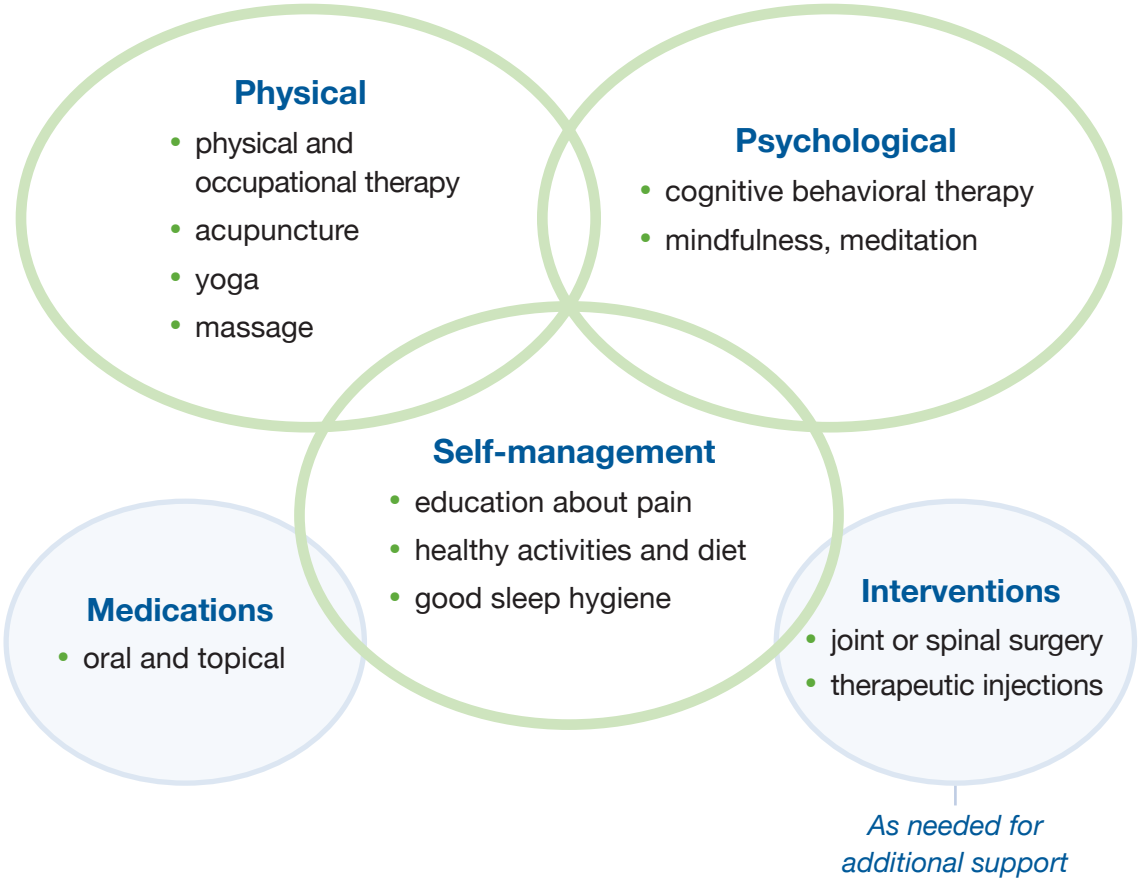
Co-occurring conditions such as depression and anxiety can impact pain management. Clinicians and teams should ensure that patients have been screened for depression and anxiety both when initiating treatment as well as on an ongoing basis. In a study of 250 patients with chronic pain and moderate depression, using antidepressant therapy reduced pain levels before analgesic interventions were added.[129] Selecting a medication with antidepressant and analgesic effects can help address both conditions and may become part of the multimodal strategy.

Selecting a multimodal management strategy

Once patients have identified the treatment goal, discussion transitions to how to achieve it. Multimodal analgesia, using medications from two or more classes, or a medication plus a non-pharmacologic treatment, can produce synergistic effects, reduce side effects, or both. One example of multimodal analgesia is the use of both an NSAID and acetaminophen, plus physical approaches (e.g., cold, compression, or elevation) to manage acute postoperative pain. Demonstrated benefits of multimodal analgesia include earlier ambulation, earlier oral intake, and earlier hospital discharge for postoperative patients, as well as higher levels of participation in activities necessary for recovery (e.g., physical therapy).[125]

In a patient with chronic pain, putting together various strategies, including movement-based or psychological options, combined with medications or other interventions, creates a menu of modalities that together can meaningfully reduce pain and improve function.

Figure 4: Management approaches for chronic pain[130]



Assessing treatment

Determining the success of treatment relies on the unique functional goals identified for each patient. The use of a consistent tool to monitor change (e.g., VAS for acute pain or P.E.G. for chronic pain) can help track change over time. Discussions about tolerability of each intervention (e.g., side effects of medications or challenges with completing movement-based options) determine what adjustments to the pain management plan are needed. Some medications require titration to reach optimal doses and need an adequate duration to determine optimum benefit. See Appendix II for initial dosing, titration, and dose information. A sufficient trial should be attempted before labeling the option as unsuccessful.

BOTTOM LINE: Working with the patient to set a functional goal meaningful to their life provides an assessable goal for treatment and centers the patient on the expectation that complete pain relief is not the goal. For most patients with chronic pain, a multi-modal treatment strategy will be optimal, with ongoing attention paid to assessing and treating mental health symptoms.

Strategies for patients requiring opioids

Although the evidence for long-term effectiveness of opioids is weak, an opioid may be indicated for patients with intractable, moderate-to-severe non-cancer nociceptive pain that is not sufficiently responsive to non-opioid treatment options. However, patients are not required to fail multiple treatment strategies before utilizing opioids. Patients with contraindications to other medications or hepatic or renal dysfunction may not be able to use other analgesic strategies. In cases where opioids are needed, additional steps to reduce risk to patients and household members are required.[74]

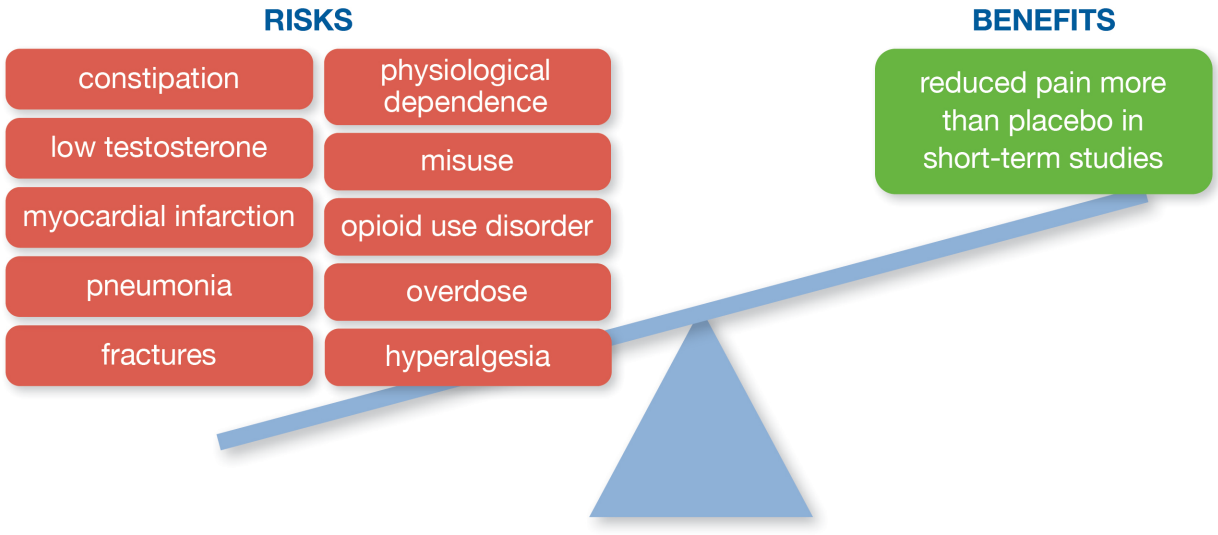
Prescription should be guided by the following principles (each detailed below):

- Discuss risks and benefits of opioid use.
- Establish a written treatment agreement.
- Check or monitor opioid use.
- Use caution with dose escalation.
- Prescribe naloxone.
- Screen for opioid misuse or addiction.
- Taper or discontinue opioids when risk outweighs the benefit.

Discuss opioid risks and benefits

Educate patients about the risks and benefits of opioid use prior to initiating opioids, and discuss them at each subsequent visit. For most patients, the risks of opioid therapy, as shown in Figure 5, outweigh the benefits. However, for some patients with nociceptive pain, the use of low-dose opioids may be a reasonable approach for short-term use. For these patients, discuss the duration for which opioid use is anticipated and set a clear end date as part of the decision for opioid use. For patients trialing an opioid intended for chronic use, set clear expectations regarding the benefits required for continuation and describe the plan if benefits are insufficient or outweighed by the risks.

Figure 5: Balancing the risks and benefits of opioid therapy



Document the treatment plan

Prepare a treatment plan when opioids are initiated to clarify how opioids will be prescribed, goals of therapy, possible risks and side effects, monitoring requirements, and a discontinuation or tapering plan.[77] A signed informed consent document detailing the potential risks and benefits may be either incorporated into the larger agreement or added as a separate form, if desired or required by state law. Agreements may specify that prescriptions be obtained from a single pharmacy or a single provider. Patients should be informed that opioid prescriptions are tracked and will be monitored. Additional monitoring may include pill counts or toxicology screens. While the use of a written treatment plan has been recommended by experts, no trials have assessed the benefit of such agreements.[74]

Initiating therapy

When initiating opioids, start with immediate-release formulations because their shorter half-life reduces the risk of inadvertent overdose. Prescribe low doses on an intermittent, as-needed basis and emphasize to patients that they should avoid scheduled, around-the-clock use, which will typically lead to tolerance/physical dependence within 5-7 days.[131] For older patients who have co-occurring conditions, consider starting at an even lower dose and intensify monitoring for adverse effects.[77]

Long-term opioid use often begins with treatment for acute pain, and research shows that opioids are often over-prescribed for acute pain. For example, a study of 1,416 patients in a 6-month period found that surgeons prescribed a mean of 24 pills (standardized to 5 mg oxycodone) but patients reported using a mean of only 8.1 pills (utilization rate 34%).[132] For acute pain, only enough opioids should be prescribed to address the expected duration and severity of pain from an injury or procedure (or to cover pain relief until a follow-up appointment). Several guidelines about opioid prescribing for acute pain from emergency departments[133,134] and other settings[135,136] have recommended prescribing ≤3 days of opioids in most cases, whereas others have recommended ≤7 days,[137] or ≤14 days.[138]

Check or monitor opioid use

Follow-up appointments should occur one to four weeks after initiation of opioids or with dose changes, and maintenance therapy visits should occur at least every three months. Each visit should include an assessment using a pain and function tool, questions about side effects, evaluation of overdose risk, and discussions about how the medication is being used.[77] At every visit, there should be an active clinical decision as to whether or not to continue opioid treatment based on whether the benefits exceed the risks.

Many strategies to assess opioid use and ensure patient safety have been recommended. However, simply asking patients how they are using the medication, how often they take it, how many pills they take at one time, and what triggers them to take the medication, can identify patients who may be misusing opioids or need changes to their pain management plan. Other ways to objectively monitor opioid use are checking prescription drug monitoring programs, completing toxicology testing, or random pill counts.

Use prescription drug monitoring programs (PDMPs)

All 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia have operational PDMPs. Information available through PDMPs varies based on reporting requirements and restrictions. Differences between PDMPs may

include DEA schedules reported, timeliness of pharmacy dispensing information, access, and required reviews.

Some states have specific requirements for PDMP use, such as requiring review prior to initial prescription or any time a specific prescription is written (for example hydrocodone ER [Zohydro]). Clinicians should remain updated about the specific requirements of their state PDMPs. The 2022 CDC updated pain management guidelines recommend the PDMP is checked upon initial opioid prescribing and then periodically during opioid therapy.[74]

Minimum recommendations for PDMP use include:

- Check the PDMP before starting any patient on opioid therapy.
- Review the PDMP periodically throughout opioid therapy (at least every three months).
- Look for prescriptions for other controlled substances, like benzodiazepines, that can increase risk of overdose death.
- Review the total MME per day.

Toxicology testing

All patients on long-term opioid therapy should be periodically (at least annually) tested for substance use.[74] Universal testing (testing all patients in an identical manner) may help de-stigmatize testing and remove any perceived bias related to who is tested. Effort should be made to ensure toxicology testing is not financially burdensome or treatment limiting to patients. Rather than setting up an “us vs. them” mentality, toxicology testing can improve the therapeutic alliance by transferring the role of detector from the clinician to the test.[139] The 2022 CDC guidelines recommend that toxicology testing should be used in the context of clinical information in order to inform and improve patient care, and should not be used in a punitive manner.[74]

Although urine remains the most common matrix for toxicology testing, technology using saliva, sweat, exhaled breath, and hair has becoming increasingly sophisticated, albeit with a currently-limited evidence base.[139] Advantages of non-urine testing include their relative simplicity, ease of administration, and reduction in the possibilities of sample tampering.

The two main types of urine toxicology testing are immunoassay (“presumptive” testing) and chromatography/mass spectrometry (“definitive” testing) (see Table 5 for details). Providers using urine toxicology tests should be familiar with the metabolites and expected positive results based on the opioid prescribed. For example, a patient taking oxycodone may test positive for both oxycodone and oxymorphone (a metabolite).[77]

Table 5: Comparison of two major types of urine toxicology testing

Immunoassay	Gas chromatography/mass spectrometry
less expensive, fast, easy to use	more expensive, labor intensive
most frequently used test in all settings	requires advanced laboratory
commonly used for screening	used mostly to confirm positive immunoassay result
engineered antibodies bind to metabolites	directly measures substance and its metabolites
qualitative testing: positive or negative results only	quantitative test with precise results
does not differentiate between various natural opioids	differentiates all opioids
typically misses semi-synthetic and synthetic opioids (e.g., fentanyl, oxycodone, buprenorphine)	more accurate for semi-synthetic and synthetic opioids
often has high cut-off levels giving false negative results	very sensitive to low levels of a substance, minimizing false negatives
may show false positives from poppy seeds, quinolone antibiotics, or over the counter medications	very specific, less cross-reactivity, low rates of false positives

Prior to any type of toxicology testing, discuss the following points with the patient:[140]

- purposes/goals of testing
- framing of testing as a normal part of standard safety measures that does not imply a lack of trust on the part of the provider
- what substances the test covers
- timing and dose of opioids and other substances consumed recently
- potential costs if testing is not covered by insurance
- possibility of random testing, depending on treatment agreement and monitoring approach
- what might happen based on test results

When results of a toxicology test come back, clinicians should:[140]

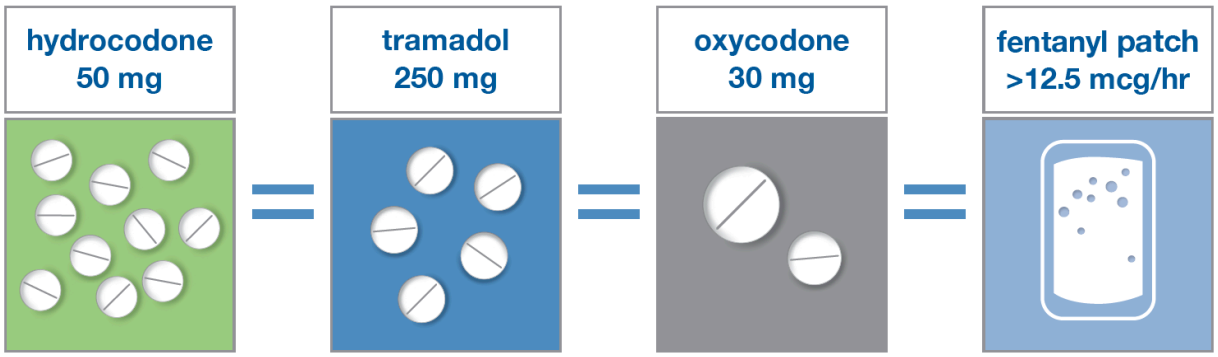
- order any needed confirmatory testing for unexpected results (false-positives are possible)
- inform the patient of the results
- discuss with the patient any unexpected results or findings of substance use (note: it can be helpful to ask patients beforehand what they expect the toxicology test will show)
- review the treatment agreement and reiterate concerns about the patient's safety
- determine if frequency and intensity of monitoring should be increased

Decision tools and help with interpreting urine toxicology results are available at mytopcare.org.

Caution with dose escalation

When escalating opioid doses, be aware of the 50 morphine milligram equivalents (MME)/day dosing threshold.[77] According to the CDC, doses >50 MME/day are associated with more than double the risk of overdose compared to patients on <50 MME/day.[77] The effect on pain is minimal, and doses higher than 50 MME/day are not associated with functional improvement.[74] The total MME/day for all prescribed opioids should be noted and monitored. MME/day is automatically calculated on many state PDMP reports but should be confirmed by asking patients how prescribed opioids are being taken.

Figure 6: Morphine equivalents of commonly prescribed opioids for 50 MME/day[74]



Role of ER/LA opioids and methadone

ER/LA opioids include methadone, transdermal fentanyl, and extended-release versions of opioids such as oxycodone, oxymorphone, hydrocodone, and morphine. A 2015 study found a higher risk for overdose among patients initiating treatment with ER/LA opioids than among those initiating treatment with immediate-release opioids.[141] Continuous, time-scheduled use of ER/LA opioids is not more effective or safer than intermittent use of immediate-release opioids. It will quickly lead to tolerance/physical dependence, and may increase risks for opioid misuse or addiction.[77] When starting opioids, begin with immediate-release options for both acute and chronic pain.[74]

ER/LA opioids should be reserved for severe, continuous pain and should be considered only for patients who have received immediate-release opioids daily for at least one week.[77] Additional caution is required when prescribing ER/LA opioids in older adults or patients with renal or hepatic dysfunction because decreased clearance of medications among these patients can lead to accumulation of medications to toxic levels and persistence in the body for longer durations.

When an ER/LA opioid is prescribed, using one with predictable pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics is preferred to minimize unintentional overdose risk. The unusual characteristics of methadone and transdermal fentanyl make safe prescribing of these medications for pain especially challenging.[77]

The use of methadone for chronic pain in primary care should generally be avoided because of higher methadone-related risks for QTc prolongation and fatal arrhythmias.[77] Equianalgesic dose ratios are highly variable with methadone, making conversion from other opioids difficult, with attendant increased risk of overdose. While methadone-related death rates decreased 9% from 2014 to 2015 overall, the rate increased in people ≥65 years of age.[142] If methadone is considered, refer patients to pain management specialists with expertise in using this medication. Also, clinicians should not be using methadone as a treatment for opioid use disorder outside of an Opioid Treatment Program setting.

Prescribe naloxone

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist that quickly reverses the effects of opioid overdose. Naloxone is available to first responders, patients, friends, family, and household members of those prescribed opioids. Primary care providers should prescribe naloxone to all patients at risk of overdose. Indications include

- opioid dose >50 MME/day
- renal or hepatic dysfunction
- co-prescription of benzodiazepines or other sedating medications
- patients who smoke, have COPD, asthma, or sleep apnea
- history of overdose or diagnosis of OUD or other substance use disorder

All 50 states have in place a standing order or protocol that allows patients, family members, caregivers, and/or friends to request naloxone from their local pharmacist.[143] Twenty states have some form of co-prescribing requirement with 12 requiring naloxone co-prescribing in certain cases such as high MME/day dose, concurrent benzodiazepine use, or prior history of overdose. Rates of naloxone co-prescription have been rising nationwide in recent years but remain very low in absolute terms. Naloxone dispensing increased from 0.55 per 100,000 population in 2012 to 292.3 per 100,000 population in 2019.[144] The highest rate of naloxone dispensing occurred in states with a co-prescribing requirement. By the end of 2020, naloxone prescribing in the Medicare population dropped significantly.[145,146] This drop did correspond to a decrease in chronic opioid prescriptions.[146]

Anyone receiving naloxone should be taught how to use the particular device and about the common signs of overdose (slow or shallow breathing, gasping for air, unusual snoring, pale or bluish skin, not waking up or responding, pinpoint pupils, slow heart rate). A variety of naloxone products are available (Table 6, next page). Intranasal naloxone and the IM/SQ injector are easier to use but vary greatly in terms of price and insurance coverage.

Table 6: Dosage forms available for naloxone

	Intranasal				IM/SQ
	ReVive	Narcan, Rextovy, generics	Kloxxado	Rezenopy	Zimhi
Dose	3 mg	4 mg	8 mg	10 mg	5 mg
How supplied	2 sprays				1 auto-injector
Available OTC	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Initial dose	Spray full dose into one nostril				Follow steps on device
Second dose	Repeat after 2-3 min or if no/minimal response				
Cost*	$52	$43 (OTC) $69 (Rx)	$150	Not available	$150

IM: intramuscular; SQ: subcutaneous; OTC: over the counter, although may be stored in the pharmacy; Rx: prescription * price varies by location. Free options may be available locally for specific products. Based on a market database of prices as of February 2026.

Depending on the opioid involved in the overdose, more than one dose may be required. All patients who receive naloxone reversal should be taken to an emergency room in case additional doses of naloxone or other medical support is needed.

In May 2023, the FDA approved nalmefene, an opioid antagonist, as a 2.7 mg nasal spray (Opvee) to reverse the effects of opioids.[147] It has a longer duration of action than naloxone and slower onset, but in late 2025 the manufacturer, Indivior, announced it has stopped marketing the nasal spray preparation.[148] Nalmefene is currently available from a different manufacturer as an injectable medication for opioid overdose (time to reversal of respiratory depression 2.5 to 5 minutes).[149]

Screen for opioid use disorder

The Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) algorithm can help primary care providers identify patients with problematic opioid use or potential opioid use disorder (OUD). SBIRT assesses the severity of opioid use, is brief (typically 5-10 minutes), and targets behaviors specific to substance use. Visit AlosaHealth.org/OUD for more information on SBIRT.

Patients reporting significant impairment or distress as a result of their opioid use may have OUD. More than 4.8 million Americans were reported to have OUD in 2024, with a slight trend downward in recent years.[150] OUD can be effectively managed with medications, but fewer than 1 in 5 adults with OUD currently receive medication treatment.[151]

OUD is defined as problematic opioid use leading to significant impairment or distress. It is marked by at least two of the following in the past 12 months:[86]

- use of opioids at higher doses or longer than prescribed
- unsuccessful attempts to control or reduce use
- significant time lost obtaining, consuming, or recovering from opioids
- craving for opioids
- failure to fulfill obligations (i.e., work, home, or school) because of opioid use
- persistent social or interpersonal problems due to opioids
- opioid use displaces social, work, or recreational activities
- recurrent opioid use creates a hazardous situation (e.g., while driving)
- continued use despite a physical or psychological problem caused or worsened by opioid use
- tolerance or withdrawal in patients taking opioids other than as prescribed

Medication treatment options include:

- methadone
- buprenorphine (as buprenorphine/naloxone tablets or sublingual film (e.g., Suboxone, Zubsolv, generics) or buprenorphine-only injection (e.g., Brixadi, Sublocade)
- naltrexone extended-release injection (Vivitrol)

Buprenorphine and methadone are both effective for helping patients avoid relapse and regain function, and they both have proven mortality benefit in treatment of OUD.[152] However, they are different chemically and also in how they can be prescribed/used (Table 7). (Note that buprenorphine can also be prescribed for pain, and formulations include a patch [Butrans], sublingual film [Belbuca], and injection [Buprenex].)

Table 7: Comparison of buprenorphine and methadone

	Buprenorphine	Methadone
Who can provide treatment	any prescriber with a DEA license that has Schedule III authority	certified opioid treatment program
Treatment delivery	no daily clinic visits are required	supervised daily administration or limited take-home treatment
Patient characteristics	preferred as first line treatment for most patients	helpful for patients who have had multiple unsuccessful treatment attempts, and/or need daily support
OUD severity	moderate to severe	moderate to severe
Initiating treatment	home or in office	certified opioid treatment program locations
When to start	patient must have mild to moderate withdrawal symptoms	any time

Naltrexone, as an injectable (Vivitrol), may be an option for patients who have successfully completed a detoxification protocol (7-10 days of abstinence from opioid use).[153] Clinicians should be vigilant for signs of suicidality because suicidal thoughts, attempted suicide, and depression have been reported with naltrexone use.[153]

Naloxone vs. Naltrexone

Naloxone (Narcan) is an opioid antagonist given by injection or nasal spray to reverse overdoses. It acts within minutes and lasts for only about an hour due to rapid metabolism.

Naltrexone is also an opioid antagonist but has very different effects. It can be given orally or by injection, and can precipitate acute withdrawal in a patient who is still taking opioids. Once successfully initiated, it can block opioid cravings for about a month with the injectable formulation.

For more information about identifying and managing patients with OUD, see AlosaHealth.org/OUD

BOTTOM LINE: Monitor opioid treatment through the use of a PDMP, a treatment plan, and toxicology testing. Reassess risks and benefits at every visit and with dose escalation. Recommend naloxone, and screen for opioid use disorder.

Taper opioids

While the goal is to provide flexible, individualized, patient centered care, for some patients the best decision may be to reduce or stop opioids for pain management when the risks outweigh the benefits.[154] Forced or rapid tapers for patients who are physiologically dependent on opioids is not recommended.[74] Patients who are not taking prescribed opioids (e.g., patients who are diverting all opioids they obtain) do

not require tapers.[74] These recommendations do not apply to pregnant patients, who should be managed by someone experienced in identifying and managing opioid withdrawal in a pregnant patient.[74]

Patients who do not achieve functional goals on stable or increasing opioid doses, have diminished quality of life, have unacceptable side effects (such as an overdose, hospitalization or injury), or have had healing of the injury (for acute pain) should be engaged in a plan to taper or discontinue opioids.[155] Patients sometimes resist tapering or discontinuation, fearing increased pain. However, a 2020 systematic review found that dose reduction or discontinuation resulted in a decrease in pain severity (9 studies), improvement in pain-related function (7 studies), increase in quality of life (4 studies), and improvement in anxiety and depression symptoms (4 studies).[156] A 2018 retrospective study of 551 veterans with chronic pain (mostly musculoskeletal) assessed pain one year before and one year after discontinuation of long-term opioids (MME/day 75.8 mg).[157] Pain was assessed on a 0-10 scale with higher score indicating worse pain. The mean overall pain score at the time of discontinuation was 4.9, and pain scores dropped during discontinuation by a mean of 0.2 points/month. Patients with moderate pain experienced the greatest reduction in pain after discontinuation.

Recommendations for tapering schedules vary and should always be individualized. The rate of opioid taper should be adjusted based on patient-specific factors such as the severity of withdrawal symptoms One way to recommend a taper is based on duration of opioid use:[74]

- ≤ 3 days of scheduled use or as needed: no taper required
- > 3 days but < 7 days of scheduled use: 50% reduction over two days
- ≥ 7 days but ≤ 1 month: 20% reduction every 2 days
- ≥ 1 month but ≤ 1 year: 10% reduction every week
- ≥ 1 year: 10% reduction each month

When symptoms of opioid withdrawal appear during a taper, the first approach should be to pause or slow the rate of the taper. Short term use of medications to help address symptoms of opioid withdrawal may be needed to help with specific symptoms. Examples include:

- central-acting alpha agonists (such as clonidine or lofexidine [Lucemyra]) for autonomic symptoms such as sweating or tachycardia
- loperamide for diarrhea
- ondansetron for nausea
- trazodone for insomnia
- dicyclomine for stomach cramping
- hydroxyzine for anxiety, dysphoria, lacrimation, rhinorrhea
- acetaminophen or NSAIDs for myalgias

A structured support program for opioid tapering may improve outcomes. A small trial of 35 patients with long-term opioid use compared a structured intervention including weekly individual counseling sessions vs. standard care and found reduced opioid doses in the intervention group at 34 weeks (mean 100 MME/day vs. 138 MME/day) although the difference was not statistically significant at 34 weeks.[158] Pain scores decreased in both groups by about one point on a 10-point scale (not significant).

In 2019, the FDA, recognizing the risks associated with abrupt discontinuation of opioid analgesics, required new labeling for opioid analgesics to guide prescribers about safe tapering practices.[159] The key elements include:[159]

- Do not abruptly discontinue opioid analgesics in patients physically dependent on opioids. Counsel patients not to discontinue their opioids without first discussing the need for a gradual tapering regimen.
- Abrupt or inappropriately rapid discontinuation of opioids is associated with serious withdrawal symptoms, uncontrolled pain, and suicide.
- Ensure ongoing care of the patient and mutually agree on an appropriate tapering schedule and follow-up plan.
- In general, taper by an increment of no more than 10-20% every 2-4 weeks.
- Pause taper if the patient experiences significantly increased pain or serious withdrawal symptoms.
- Use a multimodal approach to pain management, including mental health support (if needed).
- Reassess the patient regularly to manage pain and withdrawal symptoms that emerge and assess for suicidality or mood changes.
- Refer patients with complex comorbidities or substance use disorders to a specialist when needed.

While the intent of opioid dose reduction and discontinuation is to decrease harms associated with opioid use, recent observational studies have identified a potential increase in harms such as withdrawal symptoms, the development of substance use disorders, opioid overdose, and suicide. A 2020 systematic review found very low to low quality evidence in observational studies that abrupt discontinuation and/or tapering of opioids led to OUD/overdose (4 studies) and suicidal ideation or suicidal self-directed violence (2 studies).[156] An additional observational review found that among patients who have their long-term opioid therapy discontinued or tapered, there is an increased risk of illicit opioid use, increase in opioid-related hospital and ED visits, increased incidence in mental health crises or overdose events, and increased risk of death from suicide.[160] While these risks have not been seen in patient level data, when factors affecting opioid prescribing are available (such as in randomized controlled trials) these flags are nonetheless concerning. Ensuring access to naloxone, assessing for mental health concerns or inadequate treatment of conditions like anxiety and depression, and engaging additional support for patients with mental health concerns can help with pain management and can reduce risks of unintended adverse effects from tapering.

BOTTOM LINE: In patients for whom the risks outweigh the benefits of opioids or for whom problematic behaviors are emerging, discuss tapering opioid doses. Each taper should be personalized and flexible, adjusting based on taper response. Slow or pause tapers when needed, and engage other clinicians when needed to support the taper.

Converting to buprenorphine

Patients who struggle with an opioid taper may be a candidate for buprenorphine. As noted previously, as a partial agonist, buprenorphine can provide analgesia while avoiding some of the risks and side effect of full-agonist opioids. A 2021 systematic review analyzed 22 studies that included patients transitioning from various full agonist opioids for reasons including inadequate analgesia, intolerable adverse effects, risky opioid regimens, and aberrant opioid use. Very low-quality evidence suggested that transition to transdermal or buccal buprenorphine was associated with maintained or improved analgesia with a low risk of precipitating opioid withdrawal when transitioned appropriately.[161]

Two strategies can help transition patients to buprenorphine from a full mu agonist opioid. The first strategy (traditional initiation) requires a period of mild-to-moderate opioid withdrawal, which may require patients to forego pain medication. A second approach uses small doses of buprenorphine in conjunction with full agonist opioids (micro-dosing), a strategy studied in patients with opioid use disorder as well as those with chronic pain. It avoids the period of mild-moderate opioid withdrawal and decreases the risk of precipitated withdrawal on starting buprenorphine, but has a more complex dosing strategy. A 2022 systematic review reviewed micro-dosing in patients with OUD, with chronic pain, or both. Overall, there was no significant difference in successful transition to sublingual buprenorphine between patients in the traditional initiation group (95.6%) and patients in the micro-dosing group (96%).[162]

Why convert from a full opioid receptor agonist to buprenorphine?[120]

- lack of efficacy (including tolerance or hyperalgesia)
- risk of adverse effects from using a full mu-agonist opioid
- risk of addiction, misuse, and/or overdose
- limited ability to utilize oral formulations in patients with altered gastrointestinal motility/function

Some organizations provide suggestions for how to transition from a full agonist opioid to buprenorphine (qrco.de/VA_bup_chronicpain).

BOTTOM LINE: Buprenorphine is an effective analgesic, even for patients who have been taking full agonists long term. Switching patients to buprenorphine when they are experiencing intolerable opioid side effects and/or are unable to successfully taper off full-agonist opioids can help reduce patient opioid-associated risks.

Treatment options for acute pain

Acute pain is one of the most common presenting complaints in ambulatory care.[163] The primary aims are to relieve suffering and return function to prevent acute pain from lingering and becoming chronic. Effective treatment requires an adroit balancing of patient-related factors (e.g., co-occurring conditions, medical history, risk of misuse) and drug-related factors (e.g., potency, mechanism of action, expected side effects). A commonly-recommended way to achieve this balance is with multimodal analgesia, in which several therapeutic approaches are used, each acting at different sites of the pain pathway, which can reduce dependence on a single medication and may reduce or eliminate the need for opioids and associated risks/side effects.[125] When possible, non-pharmacologic methods should be used, alone or in combination with analgesic medications, to manage acute pain.[164] The degree to which this is possible depends on the severity, type, and origin of the pain, but many non-pharmacological approaches can be very effective, and their use avoids the potential side effects and risks associated with pharmacological interventions.

One example of multimodal analgesia is the use of acetaminophen, plus physical approaches (e.g., compression or elevation) to manage acute musculoskeletal pain. The acronym PEACE can help with setting the stage for expectations regarding acute pain:[165]

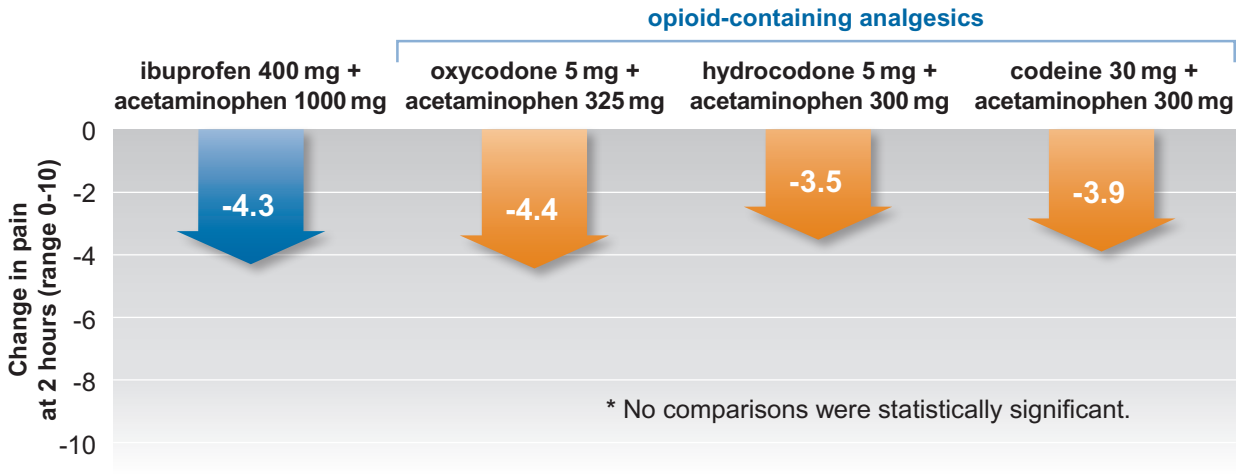
- Protection: engage in movements that do not cause pain or worsen injury
- Elevation: typically the injury is elevated above heart level when possible

- Avoid ice
- Compression: use of elastic bandages or similar options
- Education: teaching about the body's processes for healing with time

Why no RICE? Despite years of recommended RICE (rest, ice, compression, and elevation), a lack of evidence to support the interventions has shifted the paradigm for managing acute injuries. Rest is no longer recommended as it can delay healing. Instead, movement as tolerated by the injury (i.e., stopping if it is painful) promotes faster recovery. This may involve stretching rather than full weight bearing exercise. Additionally, the use of ice has no high-quality evidence to support its recommendation. In a review of trials, three of four studies that compared ice to no ice found no clear benefit to ice, other than reduction in swelling.[166]

Combining ibuprofen plus acetaminophen is as effective as opioids for acute, severe, musculoskeletal pain. In a randomized controlled trial, 416 patients with acute extremity pain were randomized to receive either ibuprofen+acetaminophen, oxycodone+acetaminophen, hydrocodone+acetaminophen, or codeine+acetaminophen.[167] The mean pain scores at two hours after ingestion decreased by 4.3 points (95% CI: 3.6-4.9) with ibuprofen and acetaminophen; by 4.4 points (95% CI: 3.7 to 5.0) with oxycodone and acetaminophen; by 3.5 points (95% CI: 2.9-4.2) with hydrocodone and acetaminophen; and by 3.9 points (95% CI: 3.2-4.5) with codeine and acetaminophen (Figure 7). None of the differences between analgesics were statistically significant.[167]

Figure 7: Effectiveness of ibuprofen and acetaminophen compared with three opioid-containing regimens in patients with severe musculoskeletal pain[167]



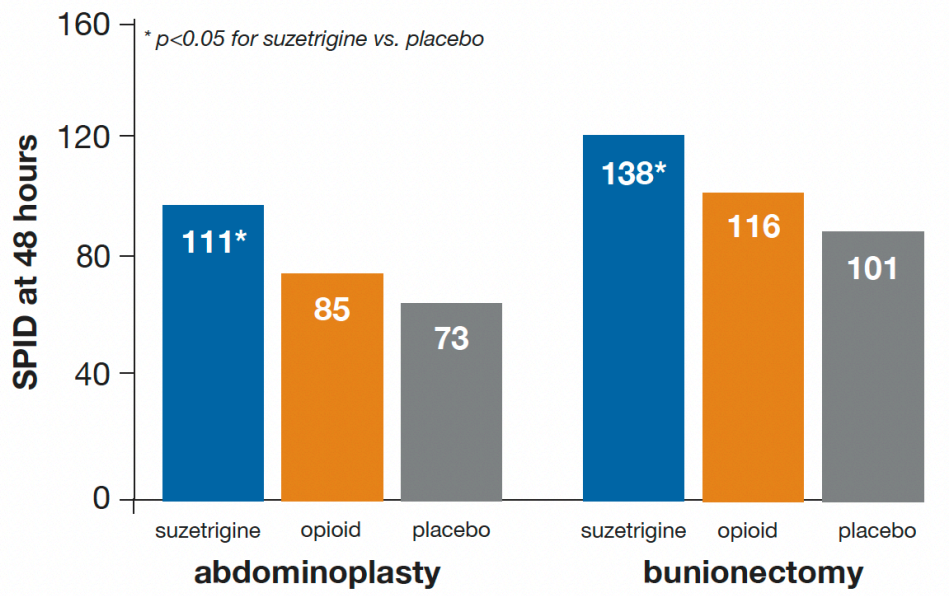
Marketed as a safer alternative to opioids, suzetrigine (Journavx) is a non-opioid pain reliever FDA approved in 2025 for treating acute pain. Suzetrigine inhibits a specific type of calcium channel called the NA_v 1.8 channel.[168] Blocking this channel interrupts the production of action potentials in pain-related sensory neurons, thus reducing the perception of pain.

The evidence for suzetrigine's efficacy comes from two randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials evaluating pain in the 48-hours post-procedure in patients with moderate to severe pain following abdominoplasty (n=303) or bunionectomy (n=274). Patients were randomized one of four groups: suzetrigine 100 mg once, then 50 mg every 12 hours; suzetrigine 60 mg once then 30 mg every 12 hours;

hydrocodone 5 mg/acetaminophen 325 mg every 6 hours; or placebo. The primary outcome was the sum of pain intensity difference (SPID), which assesses pain intensity out to 48 hours, at 19 different time points.

At 48 hours, suzetrigine 50 mg had significantly greater SPID than placebo (Figure 8). Suzetrigine 30 mg was no different than placebo (not shown).

Figure 8: Sum of pain intensity difference (SPID) scores for suzetrigine 50 mg vs. comparators[168]



Adverse effects were mostly mild to moderate with headache (14% vs. 6%) and constipation (9% vs. 5%) more common in the suzetrigine 50 mg group than placebo, respectively. Based on this 48-hour data and a 14-day open label safety evaluation, the FDA approved suzetrigine for severe, acute pain. Studies are ongoing regarding the efficacy of suzetrigine for chronic pain conditions, like diabetic peripheral neuropathy.[169] To date, one study of suzetrigine for lumbosacral radiculopathy failed to show a difference in efficacy from placebo.[170]

Opioids are reliable—if potentially risky—agents for moderate-to-severe acute pain, although their efficacy appears to wane by three months.[74] Neuronal and physiologic adaptations to long-term opioid use can result in reduced analgesic effectiveness, or even, paradoxically, increased pain or sensitivity to pain.[17]

If an opioid is deemed necessary to treat moderate-to-severe acute pain, the following general principles are recommended:

- Avoid extended-release and long-acting opioids such as methadone, fentanyl patches, and extended release/long-acting (ER/LA) versions of opioids such as oxycodone or oxymorphone.
- Avoid co-prescribing opioids with other drugs known to depress central nervous system function (e.g., benzodiazepines)
- Limit the dose and quantity of opioids to address the expected duration and severity of pain (usually less than three days).

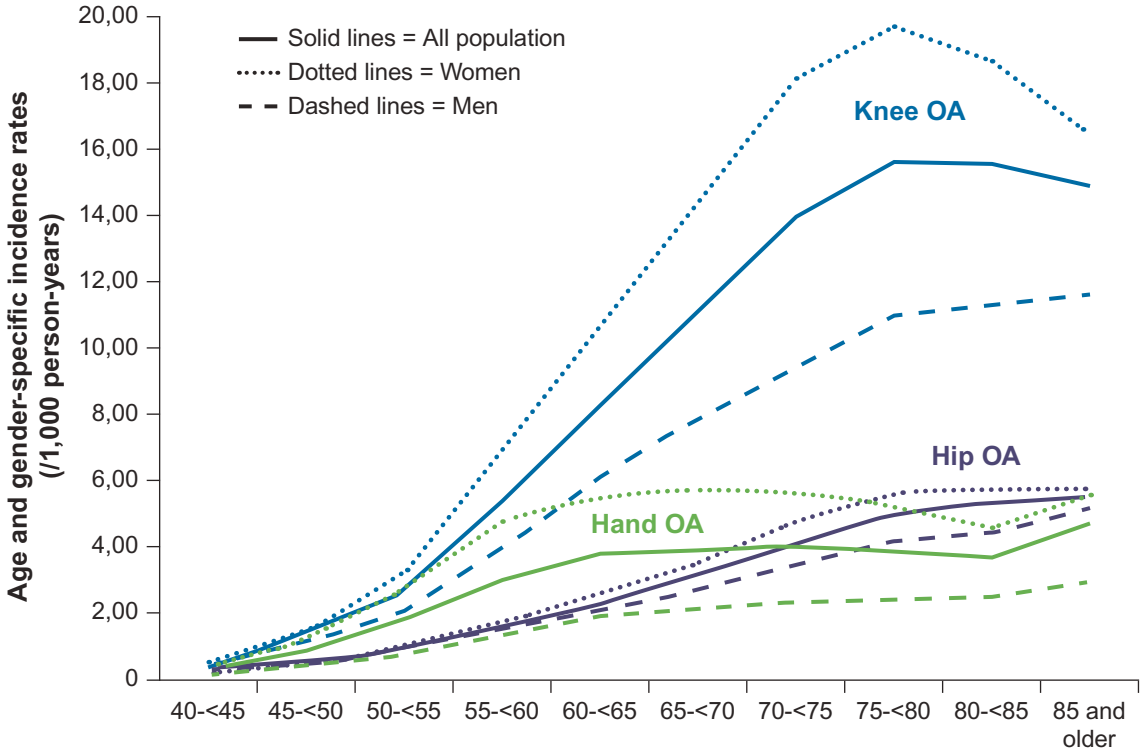
- Combine opioids with other treatments (e.g., non-pharmacologic options, NSAIDs, or acetaminophen).
- Closely monitor patients with impaired hepatic or kidney function if they are prescribed opioids

BOTTOM LINE: Acute pain is typically time limited, which may be reassuring to patients. Recommend a multimodal strategy for treatment, such as PEACE, for acute sprains or strains. The new NA_v 1.8 calcium channel inhibitor, suzetrigine, demonstrates short-term relief of moderate-severe postoperative pain, but lacks data beyond 14 days. Opioids, when needed, should be for the lowest dose and the shortest duration.

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a common source of pain and disability that affects nearly 70% of those over 65 years of age.[171] The joints involved tend to be the hand, hip, and knee, with knee being most common and with the bulk of evidence about treatments and interventions being for hip and knee OA. As shown in Figure 9, more women than men suffer with OA.[172]

Figure 9: Incidence rates of OA by involved joints[173]



Non-pharmacologic options

Exercise and physical activity

Evidence demonstrates that exercise, particularly aerobic exercise, and physical activity can modestly reduce pain and improve function in patients with OA.[174,175]

A 2024 Cochrane review of 139 randomized trials (N=12,468 participants with knee OA) comparing exercise to placebo, usual care, or no intervention found that exercise probably improves pain, physical function, and quality of life in the short term (low to moderate-quality evidence).[176] Specifically, compared with attention control/placebo, exercise may slightly improve pain immediately post-intervention (mean 8.70 points better (on a scale of 0 to 100); 95% CI: 5.70-11.70; may improve physical function (mean 11.27 points better (on a scale of 0 to 100); 95% CI: 7.64- 15.09; and likely increases participant-reported treatment success (RR 1.46; 95% CI: 1.11- 1.92). Exercise interventions were diverse and included tai chi, physical therapy, strength training, and aerobic exercise (e.g., walking, cycling).

The importance of clear patient education about the potential benefits of exercise for patients with OA was suggested by results from a review of 12 qualitative studies, conducted as part of the same Cochrane review. The authors noted that patients are often worried that they might hurt themselves by exercising, or that the exercise might worsen their symptoms. Patients wanted providers to give better information about the safety and value of exercise as well as exercise recommendations tailored to individual patient needs and abilities.[177]

Exercise programs delivered via internet or smart phone can also be effective. At 6 weeks, an app- based exercise program reduced pain scores vs. usual care by 1.5 points (95% CI: 0.8-2.2) on a scale from 0-10 and improved function 3.4 points (95% CI: 0.7-6.2) using the 68 point Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index (WOMAC) .[178] A web-based intervention with text message support found longer term benefit vs. a control website, with a reduction in knee pain (mean difference 1.6; 95% CI: 0.9-2.2 on a scale from 0-10) and improvement in function (mean difference 5.2; 95% CI: 1.9-8.5 on the WOMAC index at 24 weeks.)[179] The program is available for free at mykneeexercise.org.au/my-knee-strength/.

Tai chi

A meta-analysis of 15 randomized trials in patients with musculoskeletal pain (due to OA in 80%) found tai chi to be moderately effective compared to no intervention in improving both pain (SMD -0.66; 95% CI: -0.85 to -0.48) and disability (SMD -0.66; 95% CI: -0.85 to -0.46) at up to 3 months.[180] No statistically significant differences were observed at 3 months to 1 year, or >1 year.

A 2026 trial randomized 178 adults with knee OA to either a website with general information about OA and the value of exercise or a website with that information plus an unsupervised video-based tai chi intervention and encouragement to use the app.[181] (The video program is available free online at: myjoint-taichi.org/.) After 12 weeks, participants in the tai chi group reported greater improvements in knee pain (control, -1.3 points vs. -2.7 points in the tai chi group on a 10-point scale, $P < 0.001$) and function (control, -6.9 points vs -12.0 points in the tai chi group on a 68-point scale, $P < 0.001$). More participants in the tai chi than in the control group achieved a minimal clinically important difference in pain (73% vs. 47% $P < 0.001$) and function (72% vs 52%; risk difference, 0.2, $P = 0.007$).

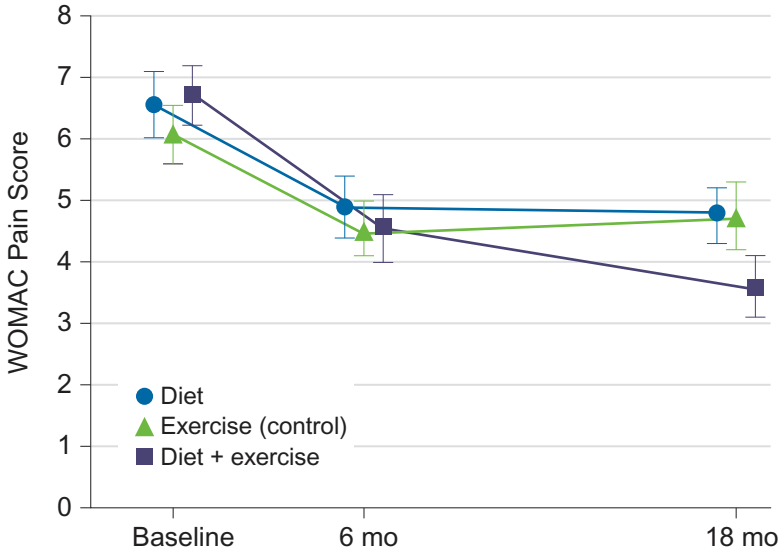
A randomized trial with 204 adults with symptomatic knee OA compared 12 weeks of twice-weekly tai chi vs. standard physical therapy and followed patients for 52 weeks. Both study arms showed significant

improvements from baseline pain scores at 52 weeks, but there was no statistically significant difference between groups in terms of pain or function.[182]

Weight loss

Weight loss interventions studied for OA typically focus on joint stress or injury rather than pain. However, in the **Intensive Diet and Exercise for Arthritis (IDEA)** randomized trial, the investigators assessed pain as a secondary outcome.[30] The initial study included 545 older adults with knee OA and overweight who were randomized to one of three approaches: diet plus exercise, diet alone, or exercise alone. Diet focused on calorie restriction to achieve at least a 10% reduction in body weight. The recommended exercise program called for one hour of aerobic and strength training activities three times a week. Pain was measured with the Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index (WOMAC) pain subscale at baseline, 6 months (end of intervention), and 18 months (Figure 10). At 18 months the diet plus exercise intervention was associated with greater pain reduction than the diet or exercise alone groups. In the diet plus exercise group 38% of patients reported little or no pain compared with 20% and 22% of patients with diet or exercise alone, respectively (P=0.002 for both comparisons).[30] A 2022 follow-up study (N=823) conducted in community settings randomized adults age 50 years and older to either a diet and exercise group or an attention control group and followed them for 18 months.[183] Again, those in the diet and exercise group reported slightly less pain at study end: WOMAC score of 5.0 vs. 5.5 in the attention control group, which was statistically significant but, as the authors noted, of uncertain clinical importance.

Figure 10: WOMAC pain scores across 18 months[30]



Obesity impacts recovery after total knee replacement. A trial of 82 patients with obesity (i.e., BMI ≥30) who were waiting to receive a total knee replacement were randomized to either undergo bariatric surgery prior to joint surgery or treatment as usual prior to knee replacement.[184] Patients who had bariatric surgery had significantly fewer post-operative complications compared to those with treatment as usual (difference 22%; 95% CI: 3.7-40.3%; P=0.02). Secondary outcomes suggested no difference in pain or

function. Incidentally, after bariatric surgery, 12 patients (29.3%) declined knee surgery while 2 patients (4.9%) declined knee replacement in the treatment as usual group.

The effects of weight loss associated with the use of the GLP-1 receptor antagonist semaglutide on pain and physical functioning were evaluated in a 68-week randomized trial of patients with obesity and pain from knee osteoarthritis (N=407).[185] The mean change in WOMAC score was −41.7 points with once-weekly semaglutide vs. −27.5 points with placebo (P<0.001). Participants in the semaglutide group also had a greater improvement in physical functioning as assessed with the SF-36 score (mean change, 12.0 points vs. 6.5 points; P<0.001).

Yoga

Evidence suggests that yoga may modestly reduce pain and improve functioning in patients with OA.

A meta-analysis of 8 randomized trials (N=756) evaluating the effects of yoga on symptoms of knee OA showed significant improvements in alleviating pain (standardized mean difference [SMD] -0.92; 95% CI: -1.64 to - 0.20; P = 0.01), stiffness (SMD -0.51; 95% CI: -0.91 to -0.12; P = 0.01) and physical function (SMD -0.53; 95% CI: -0.89 to -0.17; P = 0.004) over varying follow-up times.[186] No significant improvements were observed in terms of activities of daily living or quality of life.

A clinical trial comparing yoga to strength training in adults with knee OA (N=117) found modestly greater improvements in pain in the yoga group as measured on the WOMAC at 24 weeks (between-group difference -44.5 mm; 95% CI: -70.7 to -18.3 mm). There were also differences seen on WOMAC measures of function (-139 mm; 95% CI: -228.3 to -49.7 mm), stiffness (-17.6 mm; 95% CI: -30.9 to -4.3 mm), and patient global assessment (-7.6 mm; 95% CI: -15.1 to -0.2 mm).[187] In addition, the yoga group had a modestly greater improvement than the strengthening exercise for depression at 12 weeks and quality of life at 24 weeks.

A randomized trial of 131 patients (mean age 75) with lower extremity OA compared twice-weekly sessions of chair yoga vs. a health education program.[188] At 3-months post-intervention, participants in the yoga group showed greater reductions in pain interferences (P=0.01) compared to control. During the intervention, patients in the yoga group had reduced pain on the WOMAC scale (P=0.048), and improved gait speed (P=0.024) compared to the control group, but the differences were not sustained at 3-month follow-up.[188]

Acupuncture

Evidence for the effectiveness of acupuncture for treating patients with knee OA is mixed. A Cochrane review of six randomized trials evaluating acupuncture in 413 patients with hip OA (mean age range 61 to 67 years) found conflicting evidence on its effects on pain and function.[189] In analysis of two trials with 105 patients comparing acupuncture to sham acupuncture there were no significant differences after 5-9 weeks in pain (absolute mean difference in pain score 2.1%; 95% CI: -7.9% to 3.6%) or function (absolute reduction 2.1%; 95% CI: -7.3% to 3%). One trial, however, that compared 13 weeks of acupuncture plus routine primary care vs. routine primary care alone in 137 patients found reduced pain (mean score at follow-up on 0-100 scale 26.3 points vs. 49.2 points; P<0.0001) and improved function (mean score 30.2 points vs. 49.2 points; P<0.001). Two trials reported minor side effects with acupuncture, mostly bruising, bleeding, or pain at needle insertion site.

An unblinded trial randomized 221 adults with hip or knee OA to acupuncture, sham acupuncture, or mock electrical stimulation.[190] After five weeks of treatment no significant differences in mean improvements on a 0-100 pain scale were found for any comparisons.

A meta-analysis of 5 randomized trials (N=293) comparing laser acupuncture to a placebo laser acupuncture in patients with knee OA found a modest reduction in pain (weighted mean difference [WMD] -2.33 cm on a 10 cm Visual Analogue Scale; 95% CI: -3.57 to -1.09 cm) and on knee functioning measured with the 240-point WOMAC (WMD -39.06; 95% CI: -63.79 to -14.32).[191]

Massage

An RCT of Swedish massage vs. light touch in 222 adults with osteoarthritis found significant improvement in pain and function compared to light touch and usual care at eight weeks. The short-term improvement in pain and function attenuated over time with no difference in either outcome between light touch and Swedish massage at 52 weeks.[192]

A review of seven randomized trials with 352 participants suggests that massage may be better than no treatment for reducing OA pain.[193] The trials were diverse with respect to outcomes, massage techniques, and patient populations. Clinical effect sizes for pain were moderate with about a 20-point reduction in WOMAC scores from a baseline of 50-60 points. The functional benefits were less clear; some trials showed no benefit while others showed improvements in the 50-foot walk test.[33,193]

Cognitive behavioral therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) may be a helpful adjunctive therapy for patients with OA, although evidence is mixed. A randomized trial of 111 patients randomized to group CBT or control found no difference in pain or function at three and 12 months.[194] Similarly, an RCT of 180 non-Hispanic white and 180 non-Hispanic African American patients with OA comparing a positive psychological skills program with a neutral program (control) found no benefit in pain or function between the two treatment groups at 1, 3, or 6 months.[195]

A Cochrane review of 20 studies (N=3,206) comparing CBT delivered remotely to treatment as usual (TAU) found a small beneficial effect of CBT (SMD -0.28; 95% CI: -0.39 to -0.16), with participants in the CBT group more likely to achieve a 30% improvement in pain intensity compared to treatment as usual (23% vs. 11%, RR 2.15; 95% CI: 1.62-2.85).[196]

A meta-analysis of 4 randomized trials (N=628) evaluating the efficacy of adding CBT or pain coping skills training to standard care in people with knee OA found statistically significant changes in standardized mean differences ($p < 0.001$), showing small to medium effect sizes in pain (0.488) and function (0.340) between 3- and 6-month time points.[197]

However, a trial of 111 patients randomized to group CBT or control found no difference in pain or function at three and 12 months.[194] Similarly, an RCT of 180 non-Hispanic white and 180 non-Hispanic African American patients with OA comparing a positive psychological skills program with a neutral program (control) found no benefit in pain or function between the two treatment groups at 1, 3, or 6 months.[195]

Self-management education programs

Small effects were noted in three meta-analyses of studies evaluating self-management education programs, though the benefits were not considered clinically important.[198-200] Arthritis-specific programs included techniques to deal with problems associated with arthritis, appropriate exercises and medications, nutrition, and effective communication with healthcare providers and family.

Other non-pharmacologic interventions

Transcutaneous nerve electrostimulation (TENS) has been used for pain relief for decades, but studies evaluating effectiveness have shown mixed results. A systematic review of 29 studies (N=1,398) evaluating TENS in patients with knee OA found generally modest results.[201] In an analysis of 4 trials comparing active TENS to sham TENS the mean difference on a 10-point visual analogue pain scale was a non-statistically-significant -3.78 points; 95% CI: -9.70 to 2.14 points. An analysis of 6 trials evaluating TENS alone or as an adjunct to another therapy vs. control groups found a significant reduction in pain scores (mean difference -5.85 points; 95% CI: -9.34 to -2.37 in medium-term follow up (i.e., <4 weeks after intervention). Analysis of studies using WOMAC pain scores found no statistically significant differences in either medium- or long-term results.

Mindfulness meditation for chronic pain was evaluated in a meta-analysis of 30 randomized trials (5 trials of questionable quality in patients with OA or RA) and suggest a moderate improvement in pain (standardized mean difference 0.32, result limited by significant heterogeneity) compared to standard care, passive controls, or education/support groups.[36]

BOTTOM LINE: Exercise should be encouraged, taking into account patient ability. Evidence supporting the effectiveness of other non-pharmacologic interventions for OA is limited, but these interventions are generally safe and therefore may be considered as first-line or adjunctive treatments. For a complete summary of the non-pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Pharmacologic options

Acetaminophen

A 2019 Cochrane review of 10 randomized trials comparing acetaminophen vs. placebo in 3,541 patients with knee or hip OA found small, but not clinically important, reductions in pain and improvements in function with acetaminophen (mean daily doses ranged from 1,950 mg to 4,000 mg) when used for between 3 weeks and 3 months.[202] Mean change in pain scores (scale 0-100) were 26 points for acetaminophen vs. 23 points for placebo (absolute reduction 3%; 95% CI: 1%-5%, minimum clinically important difference 9%). Mean change in physical functioning scores (scale 0-100) were 2.9 points better for acetaminophen compared to placebo (absolute improvement 3%; 95% CI: 0.95%-4.89%; minimum clinically important difference 10%). These results should be interpreted cautiously, however, because daily acetaminophen doses of ~2,000 mg may not be effective over longer time frames (i.e., 3 months). The incidence of adverse events was similar between groups (risk ratio 1.01; 95% CI: 0.92-1.11).[202]

Generally, scheduled dosing of acetaminophen is better than as-needed dosing for relief of chronic pain. The recommended starting dose of acetaminophen for elderly patients is 325 mg every 4 hours, with a maximum daily dose of 3,000 mg.[50,203]

NSAIDs

Given the inflammatory mechanism of OA, NSAIDs are the first-line pharmacologic option for managing OA-related chronic pain. In a network meta-analysis of 76 randomized trials evaluating oral celecoxib, ibuprofen, or naproxen vs. placebo in 58,451 patients with knee or hip OA, NSAIDs were associated with small-to-moderate effect sizes for improvements in pain (standard mean difference [SMD] range: 0.32-0.57) and function (SMD range: 0.31-0.51), although results were not significant for naproxen at daily dose of 750 mg, or ibuprofen at daily dose of 1,200 mg.[204] It seems that doses higher than these may be needed in many patients.

A 2017 Cochrane review of trials comparing topical NSAIDs vs. placebo in patients with hand or knee OA found moderate evidence for analgesia, with greater pain relief seen in trials of shorter durations (Table 8).[205]

Table 8: NNTs to obtain 50% reduction in pain with topical NSAIDs[205]

NSAID	Trial duration	# of studies	# of patients	Number needed to treat (NNT)
diclofenac	<6 weeks	5	732	5
diclofenac	6-12 weeks	4	2343	10
ketoprofen	6-12 weeks	4	2573	7

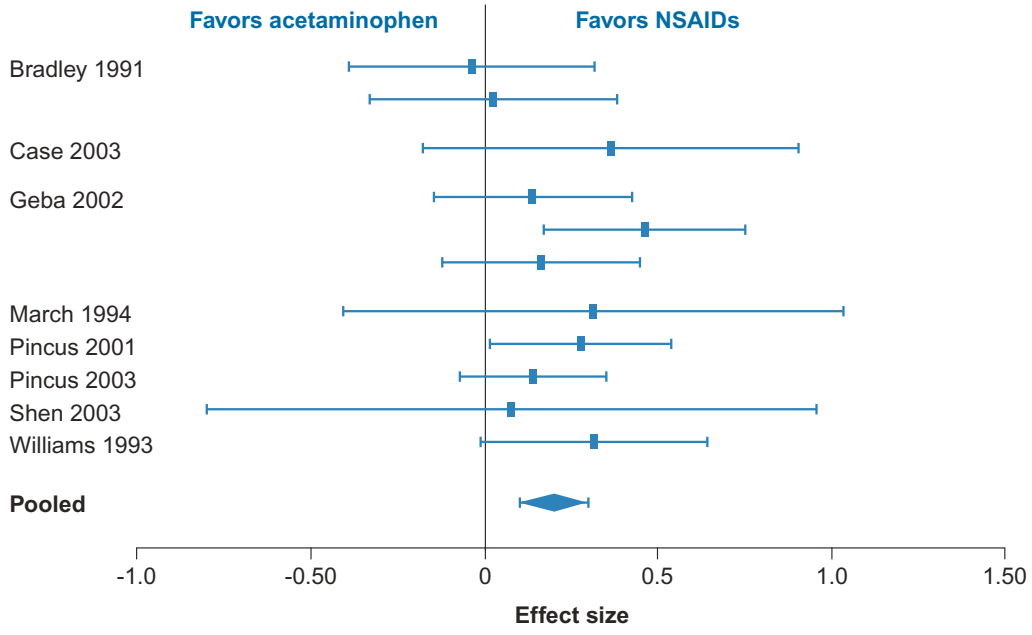
Topical vs. oral NSAIDs

Topical NSAIDs may be as effective as oral NSAIDs for OA pain. A randomized trial of 282 older patients with chronic knee pain comparing oral vs. topical ibuprofen found equivalent changes in the WOMAC OA index (mean difference on 0-100 point scale was 2 points; 95% CI: -2 to 6 points).[206] While side effects in the study did not vary between oral and topical NSAIDs, a small, statistically significant increase in serum creatinine was observed for oral NSAIDs. Generally, topical NSAIDs are considered safer due minimal systemic absorption. Topical NSAIDs may be recommended over oral NSAIDs for localized, single joint pain (e.g., knee OA) and for smaller/shallower joints rather than for hip OA.[50]

Acetaminophen vs. NSAIDs

A meta-analysis of six trials comparing acetaminophen and NSAIDs in patients with OA found a small, but statistically significant, treatment effect favoring NSAIDs (effect size 0.2; 95% CI: 0.1-0.3; P<0.05), as shown in Figure 11. NSAIDs, therefore, are preferred over acetaminophen unless patients have high risk for gastrointestinal, renal, or cardiovascular adverse effects.[203]

Figure 11: Effect size of pain reduction from baseline with acetaminophen vs. NSAIDs[203]



Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors

Although duloxetine is FDA approved for chronic musculoskeletal pain, other serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are sometimes used off-label for this purpose, despite relatively weak evidence for efficacy.[207]

A Cochrane review of 7 trials (N=1773) of serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) for knee OA found a statistically significant reduction in pain at 8-16 weeks mean difference 0.68 points on a 0-10 point pain scale; 95% CI: -0.98 to -0.38) although the authors note that this difference is probably not clinically important.[208] In a meta-analysis of 5 trials of SNRIs (N=1,703), significantly more patients reported a ≥50% reduction in pain compared to placebo (RR 1.58; 95% CI: 1.31-1.92). In the same analysis, more patients in the SNRI groups reported improved function on the WOMAC scale, mean difference -5.68 points; 95% CI: -7.34 to -4.02).

A meta-analysis of three trials of duloxetine for patients with knee OA showed patients on duloxetine (60 or 120 mg daily) were 49% more likely to have a moderate pain response (≥30% reduction in pain intensity).[209] Overall the mean difference in pain score with duloxetine compared to placebo on a 0-10 scale was -0.88 points (95% CI: -1.11 to -0.65 points). Physical function (assessed by the WOMAC subscale, range 0-68) improved by a mean difference of -4.25 points (P<0.001). A small pilot study suggests a possible role for venlafaxine sustained-release, but further study is needed.[210]

Membrane stabilizers

A small RCT of 89 patients with knee OA suggests pregabalin may reduce pain and improve function compared to the NSAID meloxicam, but the combination of meloxicam with pregabalin was better than

either alone.[211] The study lasted four weeks, and longer-term RCT data are still needed. Pregabalin is not FDA approved for OA.

Topical lidocaine

A 12-week RCT of 143 patients with knee OA found that a lidocaine 5% patch had similar effects on OA pain and function as celecoxib 200 mg daily using WOMAC pain and function subscales.[212] However, lidocaine patches are not FDA approved for the treatment of OA, and more data are needed to support their use.

Tramadol

A Cochrane review of eight RCTs of 3,972 patients using tramadol for 1 week to 3 months for OA found small improvements in pain (SMD -0.25; 95% CI: -0.32 to -0.18) with 50% more patients reporting a 20% improvement in pain with tramadol compared to placebo. Small improvements in function were found (SMD -0.2; 95% CI: -0.29 to -0.12). For both pain and function the number of patients needed to treat for one patient to benefit (NNT) is 13.[213]

Opioids

A Cochrane review of 22 trials of 8,275 patients using opioids, including buprenorphine, for knee or hip OA found small reductions in pain (SMD -0.28; 95% CI: -0.35 to -0.20) and improvements in function (SMD -0.26; 95% CI: -0.35 to -0.17) compared to placebo at follow-up periods <16 weeks.[214] Intermittent, as-needed use is preferred because time-scheduled use can be associated with greater total average daily opioid dosage. As noted earlier, however the **SPACE trial**, which included 240 patients with moderate to severe chronic low back pain or knee or hip osteoarthritis, found no significant differences in pain-related functioning comparing regimens of morphine, oxycodone, or hydrocodone to non-opioid analgesics (e.g., acetaminophen, NSAIDs, antidepressants, membrane stabilizers) at any time points up to one year.[9]

Other treatment options

Glucosamine and chondroitin, either alone or in combination, do not provide long-term benefit in OA. A small number of clinical trials demonstrated that maximum effects were achieved at 3-6 months.[215]

Topical capsaicin gel reduced pain 53% from baseline compared to a 27% reduction with placebo in one 12-week study. In a review of 2 studies, redness and burning sensation was reported by 44% and 46% of patients, respectively, who were randomized to capsaicin.[216] A 2018 network meta-analysis of 28 trials, however, found that topical capsaicin 0.025% four times daily and topical NSAIDs were equally effective for relieving pain in patients with knee or hand OA (the effect size of topical NSAID vs. placebo was 0.32 [95% CI: 0.24-0.39] in direct comparison of 13 trials, and the effect size of capsaicin vs. placebo was 0.41 [95% CI: 0.17-0.64] in direct comparison of 4 trials).[217]

Intra-articular injections

A number of injectable intra-articular agents are available to manage hip and knee OA pain, including corticosteroids, hyaluronic acid, and platelet-rich plasma.

The 2019 American College of Rheumatology/Arthritis Foundation Guideline for Management of OA of the hand, hip, and knee recommends intra-articular glucocorticoid injections for hip and knee OA (strong recommendations), but recommends against the use of intra-articular hyaluronic acid or stem cells.[218]

The evidence base for these latter treatments is very weak, with effects frequently time-limited and study outcomes focused on surrogate (non-clinical) outcomes (such as cartilage and joint structure) rather than clinical ones (such as pain and function).[215,219] For example, a meta-analysis of 14 double-blind, sham-controlled trials with at least 60 patients in each trial found no clinically relevant differences between hyaluronic acid and sham injections.[220] Two randomized trials comparing single injection hyaluronic acid gel vs. placebo in a total of 564 patients with knee OA found no significant differences in pain, function, or joint stiffness at 6 weeks or 26 weeks.[221,222]

Surgery

OA is a common reason for joint replacement surgery. For older patients with functionally disabling chronic pain unresponsive to other therapies for about six months, or who have significant reduction in quality of life due to end-stage OA, surgery may provide relief.[223]

BOTTOM LINE: NSAIDs remain the most effective pharmacologic therapy for managing OA, with duloxetine and acetaminophen as second-line options. Opioids should be reserved for patients with moderate-to-severe pain for whom all other options have been ineffective or intolerable. For a complete summary of the pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Low back pain

Low back pain (LBP) is one of the most common reasons for primary care visits in the U.S., and about 25% of U.S. adults reported having LBP lasting at least a day in the past three months.[224] Imaging is of limited utility in diagnosing the cause of LBP because most patients have nonspecific findings, and asymptomatic patients often have abnormal findings. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is recommended for red flag symptoms (for example, incontinence or saddle anesthesia), radicular symptoms, or risks for pathologic fracture.[225]

Guidelines recommend trying nonpharmacological options such as CBT, exercise, multidisciplinary rehabilitation, acupuncture, or yoga as first-line treatments for chronic low back pain, followed by pharmacologic treatment with an NSAID or duloxetine.[224,226] Opioids should be reserved for patients with pain unresponsive to all other treatments, with all of the caveats and cautions described previously[227], although some experts in pain medicine assert that opioids should never be used to treat nonstructural low back pain.[228]

Regardless of the treatment approach, patient education is an important component of care. Patient education materials should convey accurate information about diagnosis, prognosis, and ways to manage pain in order to correct false/unhelpful beliefs, reassure patients about their prognosis, and manage their expectations of recovery.[229]

Non-pharmacologic options

Exercise

A 2021 Cochrane review of 35 trials (N=2,746) of various exercise programs for patients with LBP found moderate-certainty evidence that exercise treatments were more effective than no treatment or usual care for pain outcomes (MD -15.2 points on a 0-100 point scale; 95% CI: -18.3 to -12.2 points).[230]

A 2021 network meta-analysis of 217 trials (N=20,969) evaluating the effectiveness of exercise treatments for LBP found similar benefits for pain (MD -15 to -19 points on a 0-100 point scale) and functional limitations (MD -10 to -12 points) with particular benefits with Pilates, McKenzie therapy, and functional restoration therapies.[231]

Early physical therapy for low back pain, particularly with sciatica, can have lasting effects. A trial of acute low back pain randomized 220 patients to usual care or early physical therapy which entailed 6 to 8 sessions over a 4-week timeframe. Oswestry Disability index scores (range 0-100) improved 8.2 points (95% CI: 4.3-12.1) at 4 weeks, a clinically important difference. Sustained, if attenuated, improvements continued at 6 months (5.4; 95% CI: 1.3-9.4) and 1 year (4.8; 95% CI: 0.7-8.9). Small improvements in back pain (score range 0-10) were noted as well with reductions of 1.4 points at 4 weeks, 0.7 points at 6 months, and 1 point at 1 year.[232]

Exercise training can be effectively done at home, as demonstrated in a 2021 meta-analysis of 33 studies (N=9,588) of a range of at-home exercise programs for patients with LBP.[233] Pain intensity decreased from baseline in the home exercise group (effect size -0.89; 95% CI: -0.99 to -0.80) as did ratings of functional limitation (-0.75; 95% CI: -0.91 to -0.60).

Tai chi

A meta-analysis of 8 randomized trials (N=729) evaluating qigong and tai chi programs (durations ranged from 4-24 weeks) in patients with chronic LBP found that these modalities significantly reduced pain intensity (SMD -1.07; 95%CI: -1.64 to -0.49) and disability (SMD = -0.77; 95%CI: -1.39 to -0.15) compared to control groups.[234]

Two trials (n=160 and n=320) found that compared to wait list or no tai chi, tai chi reduced pain on a 0- to 10-point scale (mean difference [MD] 1.3 points; P<0.001 and MD 0.9 points; P<0.05 respectively) although these differences may not be clinically important.[235,236] The first trial randomized 160 adults with persistent non-specific low back pain to tai chi (18 sessions, 40 minutes each, over a 10-week period) vs. usual care. In addition to reducing pain, tai chi reduced “bothersome” back symptoms by 1.7 points, and improved self-reported disability by 2.6 points on the 0-24 Roland-Morris Disability Questionnaire scale (RMDQ).[235]

Weight loss

Weak evidence suggests that bariatric surgery may improve outcomes in patients with LBP. A small, non-randomized study reported that 3 months after bariatric surgery 61.1% of patients in the bariatric group (N=25) reported no moderate to severe LBP compared to 25% of those who reported no LBP at baseline.[237] In another single-arm study, after bariatric surgery, there was a 44% reduction in pain and a 26% improvement in function associated with a BMI reduction of 3 kg/m^2 (n=58).[238]

Only very low-quality evidence exists that non-surgical weight loss programs improve LBP.[239] Calorie restriction among patients with obesity in one study was associated with a reduction in pain and a significant improvement in function (n=46).[240] A meta-analysis of weight-loss interventions identified two low to moderate quality RCTs for low back pain with no benefit to pain, improvement in disability, weight loss, or changes in mental health status.[241]

Yoga

A 2022 Cochrane review of 9 trials (N=946) found that yoga, as compared to no exercise, resulted in small and clinically unimportant improvements in back-related pain (MD -4.53 points on a 0-100 point scale; 95% CI: -6.61 to -2.46 points).[242] A review of 11 trials (N=1,155) found small, clinically unimportant improvements in back-specific function with yoga (MD -1.69 points on a 0-24-point scale; 95% CI: -2.73 to -0.65 points). Similarly small and clinically unimportant improvements were found in another 2022 meta-analysis of 27 studies of yoga for LBP (N=2,702).[243]

On the other hand, several relatively high-quality RCTs suggest that yoga can modestly reduce chronic low back pain. A 2017 study, for example, found that people with chronic LBP who took weekly yoga classes for 12 weeks had less pain and greater physical function compared to those who just got information about how to deal with back pain.[244] The yoga in the study emphasized strengthening back and core muscles. In addition to reducing pain, those in the yoga group were more likely to have stopped taking pain relievers at one-year follow-up.

Yoga can be delivered in live, in-person sessions or virtual settings (either live or pre-recorded). A 2024 trial randomized 140 participants with chronic LBP to 12 consecutive weeks of 60-minute live-streamed hatha yoga classes or a wait-list control group.[245] At week 12, the yoga group had greater reductions in mean pain intensity (-1.5 points on an 11-point scale; 95% CI: -2.2 to -0.7 points) and reduced disability (mean reduction -2.8 points on a 23-point scale; 95% CI: -4.3 to -1.3 points). At 24 weeks, the improvements in pain and disability remained statistically significant.

Acupuncture

A 2025 Cochrane review of 3 trials (N=957) comparing acupuncture to sham acupuncture for chronic LBP found only small improvements in function (SMD -0.38, 95% CI -0.69 to -0.07).[246] In an analysis of 3 trials (N=144) comparing acupuncture to no treatment, acupuncture was associated with a medium reduction in pain intensity (MD -10.1 points on a 0-100 point scale; 95% CI: -16.8 to -3.4 points).

A 2020 Cochrane review of 33 RCTs for non-specific low back pain found acupuncture improved pain (mean difference -12.30; 95% CI: -15.28 to -9.32) and function (SMD -0.44; 95% CI: -0.55 to -0.33) based on intermediate term follow-up vs. usual care. No long-term trials (i.e., 12 months or longer) were identified.[247]

A 2025 randomized trial in 800 individuals with chronic LBP found that standard acupuncture was associated with a modest improvement in function compared to usual care at 6 months (adjusted mean difference -1.0 point on a 24-point scale; 95% CI: -1.9 to -0.1 points).[248] Differences at 6 months on the patient global impression of change 7-point pain scale were very modest: adjusted MD 0.7 points; 95% CI: 0.4 to 1.0 points).

Massage

A 2015 Cochrane review of 25 RCTs compared massage vs. inactive (e.g., sham treatment or waitlist) or active (e.g., TENS, acupuncture, traction, physical therapy) controls in 3,096 adults with LBP.[249] Massage compared to sham massage or no treatment showed moderate reductions in pain (SMD -0.75; 95% CI: -0.9 to -0.6) and disability (SMD -0.72; 95% CI: -1.05 to -0.39) in the short term (<6 months), but not in the long-term. In studies comparing massage to active therapies, massage resulted in greater pain reduction both in the short term (SMD -0.37; 95% CI: -0.62 to -0.13), and in the long term (SMD -0.40; 95% CI: -0.80 to -0.01), but no difference in disability reduction was observed.[249]

TENS

Several clinical studies indicate that, compared to sham or placebo, TENS has no beneficial effect on pain or function in patients with LBP.[224,249-251]

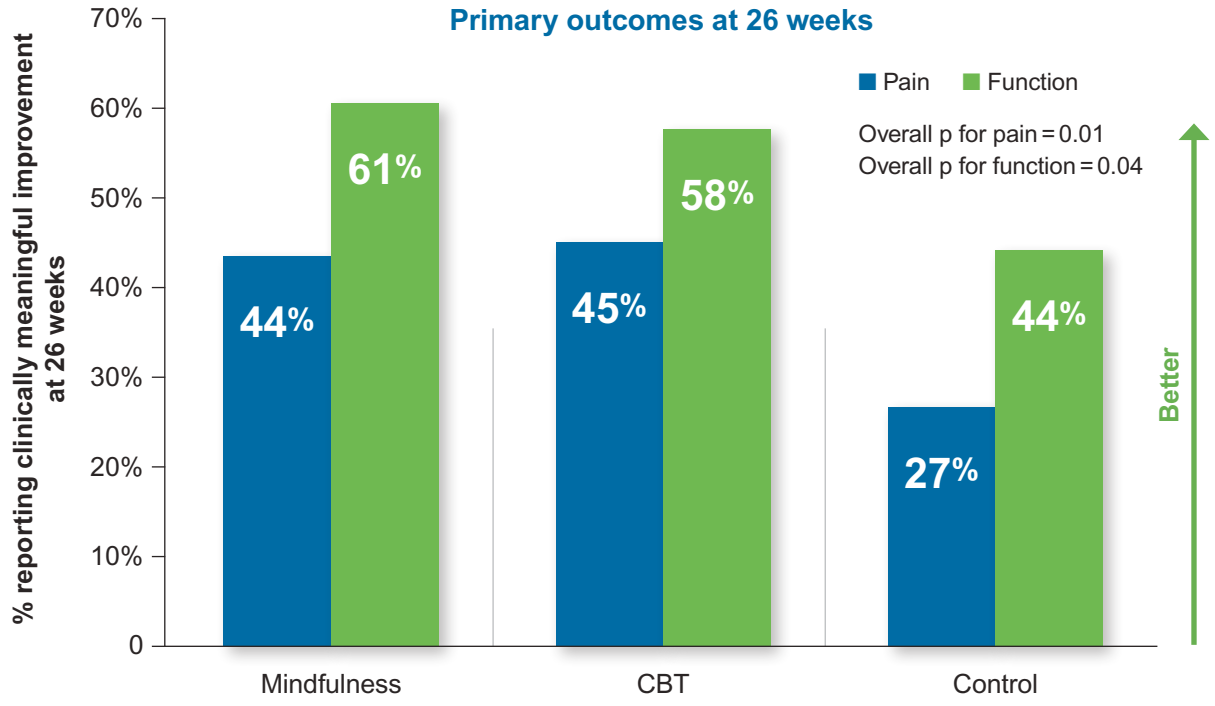
Cognitive and mindfulness therapies

A systematic review evaluating CBT found large improvements in disability scores (SMD -0.88; 95% CI: -1.50 to -0.26) but a moderate reduction in pain intensity compared to controls (SMD -0.73; 95% CI: -1.20 to -0.26).[252] One randomized trial of CBT of 701 adults with subacute and chronic low back pain found moderate improvement in RMDQ at 3 months (the end of the intervention), with sustained benefit in function and improvement in pain at 12 months when compared with usual care.[253] Mindfulness had small improvements in pain (SMD -0.30; 95% CI: -0.47 to -0.13) but no improvement in disability.[252]

An RCT of 521 patients with chronic LBP randomized patients to CBT, mindfulness, behavioral therapy (i.e., education to alter maladaptive pain-related behaviors) or usual care. By the end of the 8-week intervention, pain improved significantly in the intervention groups compared to usual care. This benefit persisted at 6-month follow-up. Functional benefits were not seen during the intervention but appeared during 6 month follow-up, suggesting persistence of benefit beyond the intervention timeframe.[254]

Another trial randomized 342 patients with chronic LBP to CBT, mindfulness-based stress reduction, or usual care. Both the CBT and mindfulness intervention consisted of eight weekly two-hour classes. Both mindfulness and CBT were associated with greater improvements in pain and function compared to usual care at 26 weeks (with benefit persisting at 52 week follow-up vs. usual care) with no statistically significant differences between CBT and mindfulness groups (Figure 12).[255] Similar findings were reported in a 2025 trial comparing CBT and mindfulness-based therapy in 770 adults with LBP who were also being treated with opioids.[256]

Figure 12: Primary outcomes at 26 weeks[255]



A randomized trial of 342 adults with LBP found that participating in 8 weekly training sessions in mindfulness was associated with significantly higher levels of function and reduced pain compared to usual care (61% vs. 44%, p=0.04).[255] The neural correlates of the analgesic effects of mindfulness were explored in a trial at Wake Forest University in which 76 healthy volunteers were taught mindfulness and then monitored by MRI while a pain-inducing heat device was applied to their leg for six minutes.[257] Mindfulness reduced pain unpleasantness by more than half (57%) and pain intensity by 40%.

Virtual delivery of CBT, mindfulness meditation, and behavioral activation therapy (i.e., education about negative impacts of inactivity and how to set goals to facilitate greater activity) for patients with chronic LBP was evaluated in a 2024 trial of 302 adults.[258] Medium-to-large effect size reductions in pain at 3 months were found with all three modalities (Cohen's D range: − 0.71 to − 1.00), with gains maintained at 6-month follow-up.

The durability of results for trials of non-surgical interventions for LBP, including CBT and mindfulness therapies, was assessed in a 2025 meta-analysis of 75 trials (N=15,395) with follow-up times ranging from 1 to more than 2 years.[259] In this analysis combining outcomes across different follow-up times, pain intensity was reduced with CBT (MD -7.2; 95% CI: -9.8 to -4.6) and with mindfulness therapy (MD -10.0; 95% CI: -14.4 to -5.6). Disability scores also declined for CBT (MD -5.7; 95% CI: -7.7 to -3.7) and mindfulness (MD -9.3; 95% CI: -14.4 to -4.1).

Self-management

Self-management programs showed small effects on pain and function. Based on a meta-analysis of 11 studies, a small reduction in pain was observed (SMD -0.10; 95% CI: -0.17 to -0.04) while eight RCTs demonstrated a small improvement in disability (SMD -0.15; 95% CI: -0.25 to -0.05).[260]

The enhanced transtheoretical model intervention (ETMI) self-management approach, which focuses on reassurance, addressing unhelpful beliefs, and encouraging recreational physical activity, was evaluated in a 2026 cohort study in 1,624 patients with LBP.[261] Compared to usual care, patients in the ETMI group has greater improvements in function scores (adjusted mean difference 3.3 points on a 0-100 scale; 95% CI: 1.5 -5.1), and no significant difference in pain scores.

Patient education may play an important role in any self-management program. A trial in patients with LBP randomized 92 patients to either standard physiotherapy care with a 6-week pain education program or physiotherapy without such education.[262] Disability scores were lower in the education group at 6 weeks (MD 8.2 points on a 0-24 point scale) as were pain scores (MD 3.5 points on a 0-10 scale).

Spinal manipulation

Chiropractic care typically involves manual therapy, including spinal manipulation therapy (SMT), which may be augmented with exercises, massage, electrical or laser stimulation, nutritional counseling, or other approaches. Manual treatment techniques used by chiropractors may involve stretching, pressure, or joint manipulations (typically on the spine, but sometimes on other joints).

A 2026 Cochrane analysis of SMT for low back pain found small improvements in pain (16 studies, 1570 participants) and medium improvements in functional status when SMT was compared to sham SMT or placebo (13 studies, 1416 participants).[263] Compared to no treatment, SMT was associated with a medium improvement in pain (4 studies, 325 participants) and a large improvement in functional status (4 studies, 312 participants).

Evidence from a 2019 meta-analysis of 47 randomized trials involving 9,211 patients with chronic back pain found that spinal manipulation had similar effects to other recommended therapies for short term pain relief (e.g., exercise or pharmacologic treatments), and was slightly better than no treatment or non-recommended treatments.[264] A review of professional guidelines for the use of spinal manipulation for low back pain suggests that it be considered a second-line or adjuvant treatment option after exercise or cognitive behavioral therapy.[265] A 2020 updated evidence review by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality found that spinal manipulation improved function and/or pain for lower back injury and tension headaches, but not for fibromyalgia, hip or knee osteoarthritis, or neck pain.[266]

BOTTOM LINE: Exercise, tai chi, yoga, acupuncture, CBT, and mindfulness can modestly reduce pain and improve function in patients with chronic, nonspecific LBP. Other interventions such as exercise and self-management education programs have smaller or mixed effects, but all of these interventions are generally considered safe. Guidelines recommend initiating non-pharmacologic therapies for managing chronic LBP as the first step in treatment.[224] For a complete summary of the non-pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Pharmacologic options

Acetaminophen

Two small trials have evaluated acetaminophen in patients with chronic LBP. A trial conducted in the early 1980s randomized 30 patients to 1000 mg acetaminophen four times daily vs. the NSAID diflunisal 500 mg twice daily for 4 weeks.[267] Another trial randomized 45 patients with either acute or chronic LBP to 500 mg acetaminophen vs. amitriptyline 37.5 mg four times daily.[268] No significant differences were found between acetaminophen and diflunisal in pain relief or reduced disability, and acetaminophen was less effective than amitriptyline for reducing pain.[269]

No trials have compared acetaminophen vs. placebo for chronic pain. However a 2016 Cochrane review of three trials with 1,825 patients with acute LBP found high-quality evidence that acetaminophen was no more effective than placebo for pain, disability, function, and quality of life.[270] On the other hand, a 2025 trial in 139 patients with LBP comparing acetaminophen (1,000 mg, 3 times daily for 4 weeks) vs. the selective COX-2 inhibitor celecoxib (100 mg, twice daily for 4 weeks) found that both reduced pain at 4 weeks (mean reduction -1.9 points on a 0-10 point scale for acetaminophen vs. -1.42 points for celecoxib) with no significant differences between them.[271]

NSAIDs

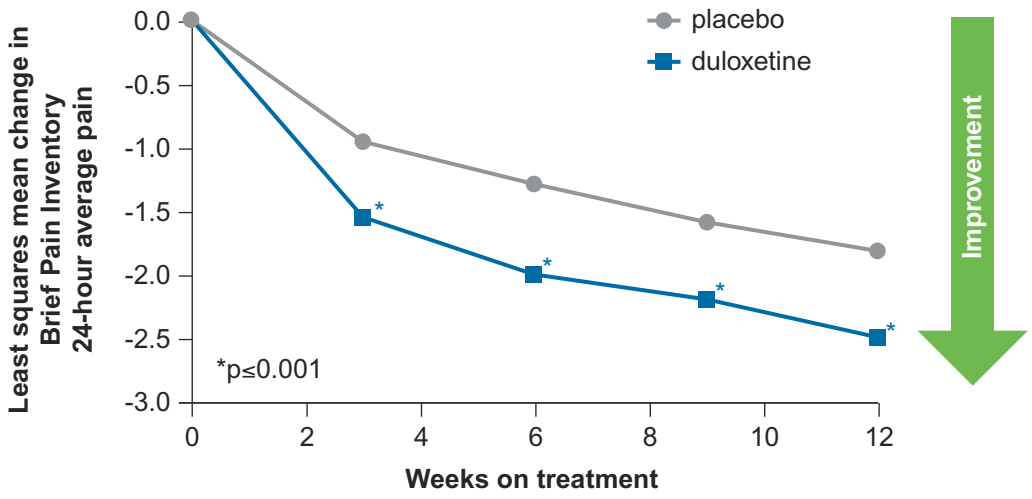
A review of six RCTs for the American College of Physicians showed that oral NSAIDs are more effective than placebo regarding pain intensity, with a small reduction in pain at 12 weeks (WMD -12.4 points on a 0-100 scale; 95% CI: -15.53 to -9.26).[272] No differences in efficacy between different NSAIDs, including non-selective NSAIDs vs. selective COX-2 inhibitors, were identified. An additional PEER systematic review of randomized controlled trials for the management of chronic low back pain in primary care identified four RCTs with 1,637 patients on oral NSAIDs who were followed for 4 to 16 weeks.[273] 55% of patients receiving oral NSAIDs and 37% receiving placebo attained meaningful pain relief (RR 1.44; 95% CI: 1.17-1.78; NNT=6). Individual adverse events reported and trial withdrawals were simliar between groups. One RCT compared topical NSAID flurbiprofen vs. placebo in 127 individuals with chronic low back pain.[274] No statistical difference in cumulative pain intensity was found (p=0.30). Similarly, a trial in 3,281 patients with nontraumatic, nonradicular acute musculoskeletal low back pain found that topical diclofenac was probably less efficacious than oral ibuprofen, and that topical diclofenac provided no additive benefit when coadministered with oral ibuprofen.[275]

Antidepressants

A 2024 meta-analysis of 9 trials (N=1,758) compared various antidepressants for the treatment of LBP. An analysis of 4 trials (N=628) found that duloxetine at 60 mg significantly reduced pain (MD -0.57; 95% CI: -0.78 to -0.36) and improved quality of life compared with placebo.[276] Higher doses of duloxetine (i.e., 120 mg) were associated with increased adverse events, primarily nausea.

An earlier analysis of three moderate-quality RCTs found small improvements in pain and function with duloxetine vs. placebo at 12 to 13 weeks.[277] One of the studies involved 401 patients randomized to duloxetine 60 mg daily or placebo. Compared with placebo, duloxetine-treated patients reported a significantly greater reduction (P≤0.001) in pain on the BPI (Figure 13).[278] The other two trials found similar results, although one did not maintain significance at 13 weeks.[279,280]

Figure 13: Change in BPI score duloxetine vs. placebo[278]



A 2021 meta-analysis supports this finding, adding one additional study from the prior analysis.[281] Disability improved between 3 to 13 weeks on duloxetine vs. placebo (mean difference -3.55; 95% CI: -5.22 to -1.88). While statistically significant, the pain benefit is unlikely to be clinically important and those in duloxetine arms had greater adverse effects.

The same 2021 review did not identify any reduction in pain or improvement in function with TCAs, SSRIs, trazodone, or bupropion, a finding echoed by the previously-mentioned 2024 meta-analysis.[276,281]

Membrane stabilizers

A 2025 meta-analysis of 18 studies (N=5,000) evaluating pregabalin for LBP found evidence of efficacy for pain relief relative to placebo over relatively short follow-up times: at 4 weeks, SMD -0.64; 95% CI: -1.09 to -0.20 and at 8 weeks, SMD -0.50; 95% CI: -0.71 to -0.29.[282] No significant differences were reported on measures of disability or adverse events.

A systematic review identified nine trials comparing topiramate, gabapentin, or pregabalin to placebo in 859 individuals. Fourteen of 15 comparisons found membrane stabilizers ineffective in reducing pain or disability in chronic LBP. Gabapentin was accompanied by an increased risk for adverse events.[283]

Topical lidocaine

Evidence supporting the use of lidocaine in chronic LBP is mixed. Five open-label studies reported statistically significant reductions on pain severity and improvements in quality of life, however, two RCTs failed to find a difference vs. placebo.[284]

Tramadol

In a 2023 Cochrane review evaluating a range of pharmacological treatments, low-certainty evidence was found in 5 trials (N=1,378) for a medium between-group difference favoring tramadol for reducing pain intensity against placebo (SMD -0.55 points on 0-10 point scales; 95% CI: -0.66 to -0.44) and moderate-certainty evidence was found for a small between-group difference favoring tramadol for reducing disability (SMD -0.18, 95% CI -0.29 to -0.07).[285]

Buprenorphine

Transdermal and buccal buprenorphine have reduced pain in patients with chronic LBP compared to placebo, but functional improvements are less clear.[277] A recent systematic review and network meta-analysis suggests buprenorphine is more than two times more likely to achieve a 30% reduction in pain than placebo (OR 2.29; 95% CI: 1.05-5.07). Pain response was similar with buprenorphine as other full agonist opioids.[286]

Other opioids

The risks associated with using opioids for chronic LBP are likely to outweigh potential benefits. A systematic review of RCTs published through November 2016 found that as compared to placebo, opioids provided small short-term pain relief for chronic low-back pain and small improvement in function, but had a higher risk of nausea, vomiting, dizziness, somnolence, constipation, and dry mouth.[277] No difference in pain response was observed between immediate release or ER/LA opioid products. None of the reviewed trials evaluated the long-term effect (>1 year) of opioids on either pain or function.[277]

In addition, as noted earlier, the **SPACE trial**, which included patients with moderate to severe chronic low back pain, found no significant differences in pain-related functioning comparing regimens of morphine, oxycodone, or hydrocodone to non-opioid analgesics (e.g., acetaminophen, NSAIDs, antidepressants, membrane stabilizers) at any time points up to one year.[9]

Further evidence for the ineffectiveness of opioids for LBP was found in the **OPAL trial**, which randomized 347 participants with low back or neck pain of at least moderate severity to either oxycodone-naloxone (up to 20 mg oxycodone per day) or placebo for up to 6 weeks.[287] At 6 weeks, the adjusted mean difference in pain scores was 0.53 points on a 10-point scale; 95% CI: -0.00 to 1.07 points.

Muscle relaxants

While widely prescribed, use of skeletal muscle relaxants for chronic LBP is not supported by evidence.[277]

A 2024 systematic review of 30 trials (N=1,314) and 14 cohort studies (N=1,168) evaluating long-term use of muscle relaxant medications for a range of chronic pain conditions found that such relaxants were not more beneficial than placebo for LBP.[288]

These findings support a 2021 systematic review that analyzed 31 trials of 6,505 patients comparing muscle relaxants vs. placebo in non-specific LBP.[289] Most trials evaluated muscle relaxants in acute low back pain. Those that looked at chronic LBP did not find evidence of improvement for pain or disability.

BOTTOM LINE: NSAIDs are the first-line pharmacologic option for treating LBP if non-pharmacologic options are inadequate. Duloxetine can be considered a second-line treatment. Acetaminophen may be tried for chronic LBP. For a complete summary of the pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Diabetic neuropathy

Neuropathy has a lifetime prevalence of 30%-50% in patients with diabetes. It most commonly affects the distal extremities in a symmetric fashion causing numbness, tingling, pain, loss of vibratory sensation, and altered proprioception. Improved glucose control may reduce the risk of acquiring diabetic neuropathy and slow its progression,[290] and in those who have neuropathy, pain management may improve quality of life.[291]

Non-pharmacologic options

Movement-based options

An analysis of 2 trials (N=88) evaluating exercise programs for patients with diabetic neuropathy found no significant differences in pain on a 10-point scale compared to placebo (mean difference -1.62 points; 95% CI: -6.35 to 3.12 points).[292] A small RCT of 39 Korean patients with type 2 diabetes and neuropathy found tai chi improved quality of life on five domains, including pain, physical functioning, social functioning, vitality and a mental component score, compared with usual care, but there was no significant difference in neuropathy scores.[293]

Acupuncture and massage

The evidence for effectiveness of acupuncture and massage on symptoms of diabetic neuropathy is limited.

A 2025 meta-analysis of 14 trials (N=1,169) assessing acupuncture for pain related to diabetic peripheral neuropathy found that, compared to sham acupuncture, acupuncture was associated with a small but not clinically important reduction in pain (weighted mean difference -1.44 cm on a 10 cm scale; 95% CI: -1.72 to -1.15).[294]

A pilot trial comparing electroacupuncture (EA) to sham EA in 18 patients with painful neuropathy found no significant reductions in either group as assessed by the Douleur Neuropathique en 4 pain scale, but a reduction of 2.78 points on the 10-point numeric rating scale for pain (58% reduction) compared to no reduction in the sham control group.[295]

A 4-week trial with 46 patients showed that, compared to usual care, aromatherapy and massage reduced pain and improved quality of life.[296] Further studies are required to provide a more clear understanding of the role of acupuncture and massage in managing pain in diabetic neuropathy.

TENS

A 2025 meta-analysis of 25 studies (N=1,275) found high-quality evidence that TENS provides a slight, but not clinically significant reduction in general neuropathic pain in the short term compared to placebo (SMD -0.35; 95% CI: -0.80 to 0.10).[297] An analysis of 3 studies evaluating TENS specifically for diabetic neuropathic pain found that TENS is not superior to placebo or other forms of electrotherapy for reducing pain (SME -0.39; 95% CI: -2.00 to 1.23).

On the other hand, a 2025 network meta-analysis of 5 trials (N=181) evaluating TENS for diabetic neuropathic pain found a small, but statistically significant, improvement in pain (SMD -1.67; 95% CI: -2.64 to -0.71).[298]

A 2017 Cochrane review of 15 trials of TENS for peripheral neuropathic pain identified five trials comparing TENS to sham TENS in 204 patients. Using a visual analog scale, TENS significantly reduced pain (mean difference -1.58; 95% CI: -2.09 to -1.09) although the evidence was found to be very low quality. Heterogeneity in the 10 trials of TENS vs. usual care precluded meta-analysis.[299] Another meta-analysis of three small trials comparing TENS vs. placebo in 78 patients with diabetic neuropathy found reduced pain severity at four weeks (SMD -5.37 points; 95% CI: -6.97 to -3.77 points) and six weeks (SMD -1.01 points; 95% CI: -2.01 to -0.01 points) but not at 12 weeks.[300]

An analysis by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, however, did not find significant or compelling evidence to suggest TENS was more effective than placebo for diabetic neuropathy.[301]

Cognitive and behavioral interventions

The evidence for CBT and other behavioral interventions as primary or adjunctive therapies for diabetic neuropathy is weak. A 2022 trial in 47 adults with neuropathy compared CBT added to standard care vs. diabetes education added to standard care.[302] At 12-weeks, mean pain scores (0-10 scale) in the CBT group dropped 0.87 points from baseline (95% CI: –1.63 to –0.11 points), while those in the diabetes education group had a non-significant mean reduction of 0.43 points (95% CI: –1.19 to 0.34). The between-group difference was not statistically significant. A small trial of 20 patients receiving CBT showed a greater decrease in pain scores at 4-month follow-up, compared with usual care.[303]

A small study of 20 patients found no difference with mindfulness meditation vs. placebo on pain or quality of life.[304] Another trial randomized 66 participants with painful diabetic neuropathy to a mindfulness-based stress reduction program or a wait list and were evaluated using the Brief Pain Inventory (BPI, 10-point scale).[305] At 12 weeks after the intervention 63.3% in the mindfulness group experienced a decrease in the mean BPI score of ≥1.0 point compared to 21.9% in the control group (adjusted OR 9.9; 95% CI: 1.5–63.8).

BOTTOM LINE: Few non-pharmacologic options have been studied or shown to be effective for diabetic neuropathy. Instead the focus should be on glycemic control and prevention of neuropathy. For a complete summary of the non-pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Pharmacologic options

The 2026 American Diabetes Association guidelines suggest initial management of diabetes-related neuropathic pain with gabapentinoids, serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors, tricyclic antidepressants, and sodium channel blockers.[306] Combinations of these medications may improve outcomes. Opioids, including tramadol and tapentadol, are not recommended to treat neuropathy due to their risk for addiction and other side effects and limited evidence for efficacy. Tapentadol is FDA approved for treatment of diabetic neuropathy, but the approval was based on two trials that used a design enriched for patients who responded to tapentadol, so the results are therefore not generalizable. Because tapentadol incurs similar risks of addiction and side effects as typical opioids, its use is generally not recommended as first- or second-line therapy for neuropathic pain.

Pregabalin and duloxetine are FDA approved for the treatment of neuropathic pain in diabetes. Other medications, such as gabapentin, oxcarbazepine, TCAs, and topical lidocaine have been used off-label with varying degrees of success.

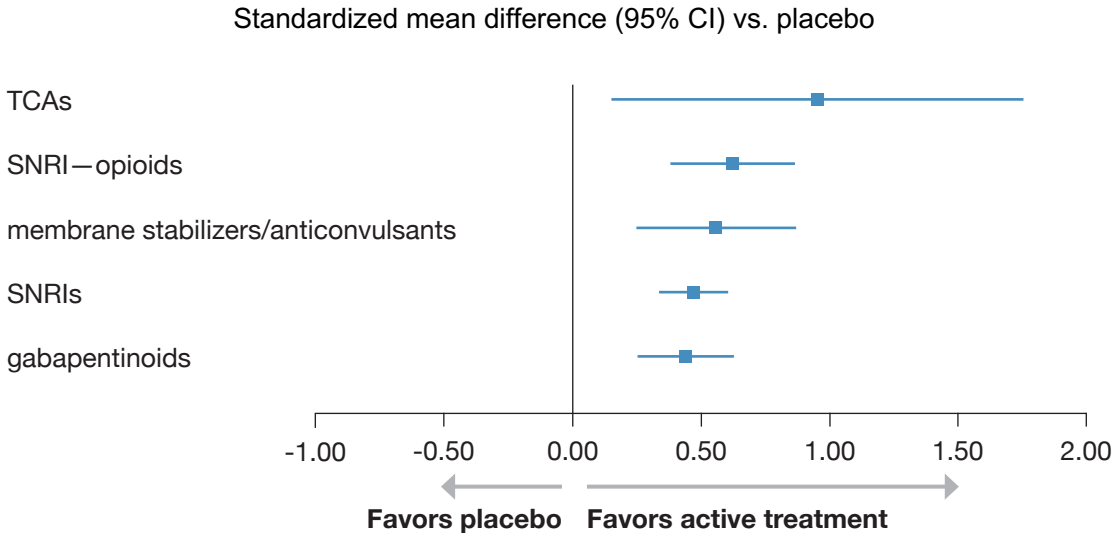
A 2025 meta-analysis of pharmacotherapies for neuropathic pain (313 trials, N=48,789) found strong evidence for the use of TCAs, membrane stabilizers, and SNRIs as first-line treatments, with weak recommendations for capsaicin 8% patches, capsaicin cream, and lidocaine 5% plasters as second-line recommendations.[307]

Table 9: Estimates for pain reduction and safety outcomes with pharmacologic options[307]

Medication class	Number needed to treat (NNT)	Number needed to harm (NNH)
membrane stabilizers	8.9	26.2
SNRIs	7.4	13.9
TCAs	4.6	17.1

A 2022 meta-analysis conducted by American Academy of Neurology (AAN) guidelines subcommittee showed that gabapentinoids, SNRIs (e.g., duloxetine), sodium channel blockers (e.g., lidocaine, carbamazepine), and SNRI/opioid dual mechanism agents (e.g., tramadol) all have comparable effects on pain from diabetic neuropathy (Figure 14).[308]

Figure 14: Similar efficacy among common medications to treat pain from diabetic neuropathy[308]



Decisions about which medication may be best for an individual patient will depend on co-occurring conditions and other patient factors. Unless significant side effects manifest, trials of 12 weeks at optimal doses determine treatment efficacy.[308]

Acetaminophen and NSAIDs

No published trials have evaluated the use of acetaminophen alone or NSAIDs, either oral or topical, for diabetic neuropathy.

SNRIs

Both duloxetine and venlafaxine have been shown to reduce pain related to diabetic neuropathy compared to placebo. A network meta-analysis found relatively large effect sizes for pain reduction for duloxetine vs. placebo (SMD -1.33; 95% CI: -1.82 to -0.86 in four trials), and venlafaxine vs. placebo (SMD -1.53; 95% CI: -2.41 to -0.65 in three trials).[309] 457 patients with painful diabetic neuropathy were randomized to one of three duloxetine dosage groups (20 mg/day, 60 mg/day, and 120 mg/day) or placebo for 12 weeks.[310] At follow-up, the mean daily pain severity score in the placebo group had dropped 1.91 points (on a 0-10 scale), with greater reductions in the three duloxetine groups: 2.36 points in the 20 mg group (not significant vs. placebo), 2.89 points in the 60 mg group (P<0.001 vs. placebo), and 3.24 points in the 120 mg group (P<0.001 vs. placebo).[310]

TCAs

TCAs studied for diabetic neuropathy include amitriptyline, imipramine, and desipramine. A meta-analysis of five RCTs found a modest effect size for pain reduction for amitriptyline (SMD -0.72; 95% CI: -1.35 to -0.08).[309] The AAN 2022 analysis of evidence has also shown that amitriptyline is more likely than placebo to improve pain (no Class I or II studies were found for other TCAs); however, there was less confidence in the effect size, and additional analyses revealed that amitriptyline was no more likely to improve pain than gabapentin.[308] Adverse effects with TCAs included somnolence and dizziness, which may be particularly important in older patients.

Membrane stabilizers

Gabapentinoids

In a meta-analysis of 16 RCTs with 4,017 patients, pregabalin was effective at reducing pain compared with placebo (SMD -0.34; 95% CI: -0.50 to -0.18).[311] Similarly, oxcarbazepine modestly reduced pain compared to placebo (SMD -0.45; 95% CI: -0.68 to -0.21) in an analysis of 3 trials with 634 patients.[311]

Gabapentin is commonly prescribed off-label to treat diabetic neuropathy. Based on a review of five RCTs with 766 patients, gabapentin had a large overall effect on pain severity, however, the comparison with placebo was not statistically significant (SMD -0.73; 95% CI: -1.54 to 0.09).[311] The AAN analysis showed that gabapentin was more likely than placebo to improve pain (SMD 0.53; 95% CI: 0.22 to 0.84; values > 0 indicating intervention is clinically better than placebo); the conclusion was based on one study that was deemed of acceptable quality to be included in the analysis.[308]

A 2019 Cochrane review of 20 randomized trials compared pregabalin 75-600 mg/day for 4-15 weeks vs. placebo in 5,943 patients with painful diabetic neuropathy.[312] Pregabalin 300 mg/day modestly increased the likelihood that patients would have:

- >30% reduction in pain intensity (RR 1.1; 95% CI: 1.01-1.2)
- >50% reduction in pain intensity (RR 1.3; 95% CI: 1.2-1.5)
- “much” or “very much” improvement on Patient Global Impression of Change score (RR 1.8; 95% CI: 1.5-2)

Doubling the pregabalin dose to 600 mg/day did not result in substantially different levels of pain reduction. Rates of somnolence and dizziness were significantly higher with pregabalin vs. placebo.

The American Diabetes Association recommends using pregabalin, duloxetine, or gabapentin as the initial treatment.[313] Several studies and found no differences in efficacy between sustained-release pregabalin and intermediate-release pregabalin in patients with diabetic neuropathic pain.[314-316]

Other membrane stabilizers

Carbamazepine, topiramate, valproic acid, lacosamide, oxcarbazepine, and lamotrigine can be as effective as gabapentin and SNRIs for neuropathic pain, though their use is off-label and associated with side effects.[308]

Topical lidocaine

Lidocaine patches are FDA-approved for treatment of post-herpetic neuralgia, and the evidence for their use in diabetic peripheral neuropathy is limited. One open-label, 4-week trial of 300 patients with painful diabetic polyneuropathy or post-herpetic neuralgia evaluated 5% lidocaine medicated plaster vs. pregabalin. Among patients with painful diabetic neuropathy, the response rate was similar for topical lidocaine and placebo (in the per-protocol set): 66.7% vs. 69.1% (no P value reported).[317]

Cannabinoids

Weak evidence suggests that medical cannabinoids may reduce pain related to diabetic neuropathy.

A 2025 systematic review of 25 trials (N=2,303, 64% involving patients with neuropathic pain) evaluated cannabis-based products for chronic pain.[66] Cannabis products with a high THC-to-CBD ratio were found to slightly improve pain (MD -0.78 points on a 10-point scale; 95% CI: -1.59 to -0.08) as were oromucosal products with comparable THC-to-CBD ratios (MD -0.54; 95% CI: -0.95 to -0.19). Such products were associated with common adverse events such a dizziness, sedation, and nausea.

A 2017 Cochrane review of 16 randomized trials comparing cannabis-based treatments to placebo in 1,750 adults with chronic neuropathic pain found slight reductions in pain intensity (SMD 0.35; 95% CI: 0.09-0.60) and increased numbers of patients achieving 50% or greater reductions in pain (21% vs. 17%; risk difference 0.05; 95% CI: 0-0.09).[318] The results, however, are limited by poor trial quality (only 2 trials were judged high-quality) and heterogeneity in treatments (10 trials evaluated an oromucosal spray containing THC or CBD, 2 trials evaluated a synthetic THC, 2 trials evaluated plant-derived THC, and 2 trials evaluated inhaled herbal cannabis). Similarly, a 2018 systematic review found a small signal that cannabinoids likely improved pain by 30% or greater. This benefit was limited to short term use (less than five weeks).[319] There were no significant differences in the rates of serious adverse events, but more people reported sleepiness, dizziness, or confusion in the cannabis groups.

None of the reviewed studies evaluated long-term efficacy and safety of cannabinoid exposure.

Tramadol

Due to their effect on serotonin and norepinephrine receptors, tramadol and tapentadol are thought to be slightly more effective than other opioids at reducing pain in diabetic neuropathy. An analysis of five placebo-controlled RCTs (three of tapentadol and two of tramadol) showed that these opioids were more

effective at reducing pain at up to 12-weeks (SMD -0.68; 95% CI: -0.80 to -0.56 vs. placebo).[311] Both medications, as noted earlier, are associated with all of the risks and adverse events common to typical opioids, though tramadol is theoretically preferred over tapentadol in regard to serious opioid-related adverse events, given its weaker opioid agonist effect. No studies have evaluated long-term efficacy or safety of these agents in patients with diabetic neuropathy.

Buprenorphine

A meta-analysis of opioid trials found substantial benefit on neuropathic pain between 4 and 12 weeks.[320] A 12-week trial of transdermal buprenorphine for diabetic neuropathy found patients were no more or less likely to have a 30% pain reduction compared to placebo.[321] Nearly 2 in 5 patients dropped out of the study in the buprenorphine arm due to side effects, primarily nausea and vomiting.

Other opioids

Opioid analgesics are ineffective for treating pain in diabetic neuropathy based on an analysis of pooled data from four RCTs (SMD -0.58; 95% CI: -1.53 to 0.36) comparing opioids to control. This analysis excluded tramadol and tapentadol.[311]

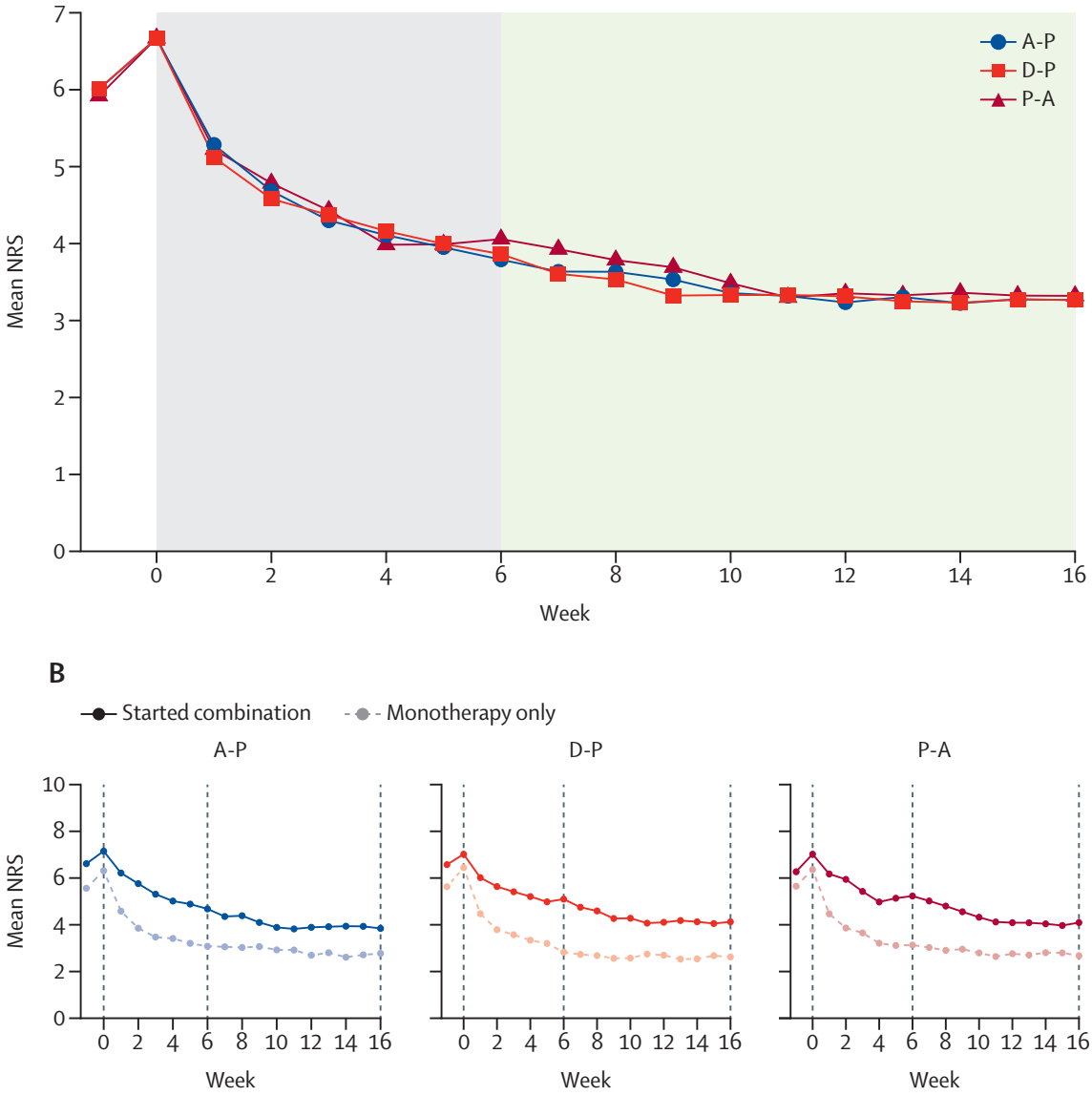
Other pharmacologic options

Evidence for the SSRIs paroxetine and citalopram is inconsistent and insufficient to recommend their use in managing pain in diabetic neuropathy. However, these medications may be effective if patients have coexisting pain and depression.[322] Earlier studies showed that treatment with topical capsaicin was beneficial for relieving pain in patients with diabetic neuropathy.[323,324] However, a 2017 meta-analysis of 5 randomized trials found that 0.075% capsaicin cream was no more effective than placebo (SMD -0.46; 95% CI: -0.95 to 0.03).[311]

Combination therapy

While a 2022 AAN meta-analysis suggests similar pain relief with SNRIs, membrane stabilizers, TCAs and tramadol,[308] little is known about combination therapy. The **OPTION-DM trial** randomized 130 patients to either amitriptyline, pregabalin, or duloxetine for 6 weeks.[325] If the pain numerical rating score (NRS) was <3, patients remained on monotherapy for 10 more weeks; if the pain was ≥3, patients went on to combination therapy. Those advancing to combination therapy received one of the two options remaining, for example a patient on amitriptyline would be randomized to either pregabalin or duloxetine. The study found that monotherapy resulted in significant pain relief in only 35% of participants (40% achieved 50% reduction from baseline pain); thus, most patients required combination therapy. The combination therapies were well tolerated and similarly effective at reducing pain (Figure 15, next page).

Figure 15: Mean daily pain scores for combination treatment groups (A) or combination therapy vs. monotherapy (B)[325]



A=amitriptyline; P=pregabalin; D=duloxetine

Side effects with combination therapy were not significantly different than monotherapy, and were predictable: increase in dizziness in patients on pregabalin, nausea in patients on duloxetine, and dry mouth in patient on amitriptyline.

Additional interventions

Spinal cord stimulation has been studied for pain relief in diabetic neuropathy but has insufficient evidence for any recommendation; most studies were single-arm with fewer than 10 patients.[326,327] RCTs are needed to determine efficacy.

Pharmacologic summary for diabetic neuropathy

The 2026 American Diabetes Association Standards of Care recommends gabapentinoids, SNRIs, TCAs, and sodium channel blockers as initial pharmacologic treatments for neuropathic pain.[306] Combining these medications may enhance their analgesic effect. The guidelines recommend that opioids, including tramadol and tapentadol, should not be used for neuropathic pain given their potential for adverse events, except in rare circumstances.

BOTTOM LINE: Duloxetine, gabapentinoids, and TCAs are among the most effective options for diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Given the similar efficacy between first-line medications, clinicians should balance potential adverse events, co-occurring conditions, cost, and patient preferences when choosing the treatment.[308] For a complete summary of the pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia should be suspected in patients having multifocal pain not fully explained by injury or inflammation. Chronic headaches, sore throats, visceral pain, and sensory hyper-responsiveness are very common. Checking 18 tender points (9 pairs) on the body may aid in diagnosing fibromyalgia. These tender points are sometimes confused with trigger points, which are associated with chronic myofascial pain. The primary difference between tender points and trigger points is that trigger points can produce referred pain. American College of Rheumatology guidelines suggest that people with fibromyalgia have pain in at least 11 of these tender points when a doctor applies pressure.[328]

A 2024 review of the literature on the management of fibromyalgia emphasizes the importance of patient education aimed at avoiding unnecessary testing and providing reassurance.[329] Treatments should combine non-pharmacological interventions such as exercise and psychotherapy with medications. The update recommends duloxetine, milnacipran, pregabalin, and amitriptyline as having the strongest evidence for efficacy in patients with fibromyalgia.

Non-pharmacologic options

A 2022 meta-analysis of 167 trials (N=11,012) evaluated 22 non-pharmacologic options for treating fibromyalgia and found that exercise, psychological treatments, multidisciplinary modalities, balneotherapy, and massage improved scores on the Fibromyalgia Impact Questionnaire (FIQ).[330] All forms of exercise improved pain and depression except for flexibility exercise. CBT and mindfulness therapies improved FIQ, pain, sleep, and depression but not fatigue.

Movement-based therapies

Exercise training is often recommended for patients with fibromyalgia,[331] not only for potential pain reductions, but for the other known benefits associated with exercise (e.g., cardiovascular risk reduction, mood improvement). The effects of exercise in fibromyalgia have been assessed in more than 30 trials, with the overall quality rated as moderate.[332] Some reviews have concluded that the strongest evidence

was in support of aerobic exercise,[333] which is the current recommendation by the American College of Rheumatology.

A 2025 meta-analysis summarizing evidence for aerobic exercise vs. a wide range of control conditions in 17 studies found an overall reduction in pain scores: MD on 10-point scale -0.49 points; 95% CI: -0.90 to -0.08, with effects greatest in comparisons to either neutral control or stretching exercises.[334]

Resistance training may also provide some benefit.[335] A 2022 meta-analysis of 9 trials in women with fibromyalgia found that, compared to controls, resistance exercise provided clinically and statistically significant reductions in pain when each exercise was performed in repetitions twice a week, for 8-12 weeks.[336] A 2017 Cochrane review of eight RCTs (n=456) comparing aerobic exercise training vs. no exercise or another type of intervention found small improvements relative to comparators in pain intensity (relative improvement 18%), stiffness (11.4%) and physical function (22%).[337] A separate Cochrane review of five low-quality studies with 219 women with fibromyalgia found that moderate-to-high intensity resistance training improves function and reduces pain and tenderness vs. control, and that eight weeks of aerobic exercise was superior to moderate-intensity resistance exercise for reducing pain.[338]

A 2023 meta-analysis seeking the optimal dose of exercise to reduce pain and anxiety in patients with fibromyalgia (68 trials, N=5,474) found that 3 sessions of exercise per week, 61-90 minutes per session, for a total of 21-40 sessions provided the most robust evidence for pain reduction.[339]

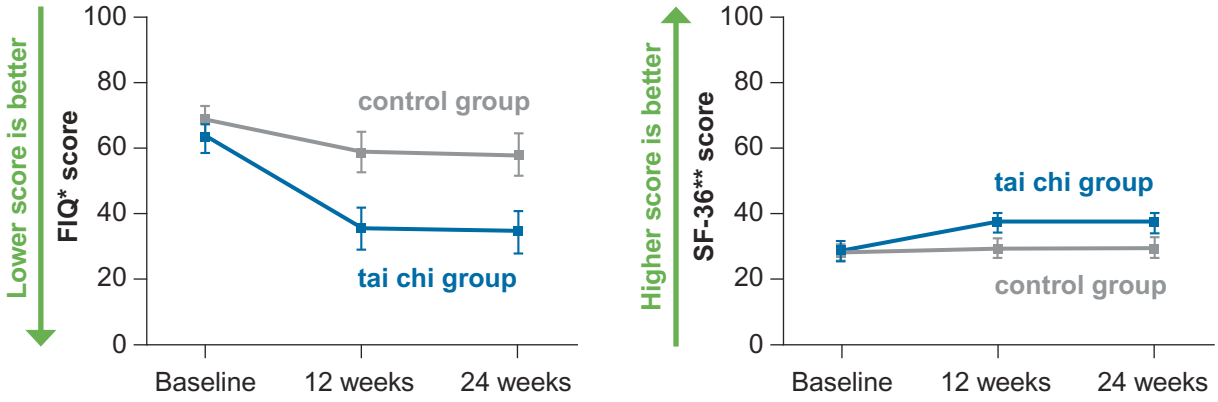
A systematic review of 34 studies (N=1,254, 26% in patients with fibromyalgia) assessing the efficacy of dance (various styles) on chronic pain found that 74% of the studies reported either reduced pain through quantitative pain measures or qualitative reports of improved pain experience among participants.[340]

An aquatic exercise program consisting of 60-minute sessions in a heated pool 3 times a week for 12 weeks was compared to land-based exercise of the same intensity and duration in a clinical trial of 40 women with fibromyalgia.[341] No differences were observed between the groups immediately after treatment, but at 18 weeks of follow-up participants in the aquatic group reported lower pain scores (2.7 points vs 5.5 points on a 10-point scale), and better sleep quality (12.0 points vs 15.0 points on a 0-21 point scale, with higher scores indicating worse sleep quality) compared to those in the land-based exercise group.

Tai chi may help reduce pain and other symptoms related to fibromyalgia. A 2018 trial in 226 adults with fibromyalgia compared a tai chi programs for 12-24 weeks vs. an aerobic exercise program for 24 weeks, with a primary outcome of scores on the fibromyalgia impact questionnaire (FIQR) (0-100 scale).[342] At 24-week follow-up FIQR score dropped by 14.7 points in the tai chi groups vs. a reduction of 9.2 points in the aerobic exercise group (difference 5.5 points; 95% CI: 0.6 to 10.4 points). Significant improvements relative to aerobic exercise were also observed for measures of patient global assessment, anxiety, self-efficacy, and coping strategies.

An earlier trial randomized 66 patients with fibromyalgia to tai chi twice weekly for 12 weeks vs. wellness education and stretching exercises. Tai chi improved scores on the FIQR that assessed pain, physical functioning, fatigue, morning stiffness, and on the Medical Outcomes Study 36 Item Short Form Health Survey (SF-36) both at the end of the intervention (12 weeks) and at 24-week follow-up (Figure 16). At 12 weeks, mean between group difference was -18.4 FIQ points (P<0.001).[343]

Figure 16: Mean changes in FIQR and SF-36 scores at 12 and 24 weeks[343]



12 weeks = intervention end | **24 weeks =** post-intervention follow-up

*Fibromyalgia Impact Questionnaire **Medical Outcomes Study 36-Item Short-Form Health Survey

A trial in 141 women with fibromyalgia that compared a 4-week active exercise program vs. 4 weeks of qi gong exercise vs. no intervention found that pain scores for both active exercise and qi gong participants declined by about 1 point (on a 10-point scale) compared to no decline in the control group, although the differences were not statistically significant.[344] Between-group differences on measures of flexibility, balance, and FIQR scores were also not statistically significant.

As many as 35% of patients with fibromyalgia also have obesity.[345] **Weight loss** in patients with overweight or obesity improved pain and fibromyalgia symptoms in five studies, regardless of the means of achieving weight loss (i.e., low calorie diet alone, low calorie diet in combination with physical activity, gastric bypass surgery). Improvements in pain were found as early as 12 weeks and seen as long as 24 months.[345] Although amount of weight lost was not consistently reported among the studies, in one behavioral intervention pain improved with weight loss as little as 9 pounds or 4.4% body weight at six months.[346]

Yoga, acupuncture, massage, and TENS

Two RCTs suggest **yoga** may relieve pain or improve function in fibromyalgia.[347] One RCT of 53 female patients with fibromyalgia randomized subjects to receive an 8-week yoga of awareness program or wait-listed standard care. After eight weeks global FIQ scores were significantly better in patients randomized to yoga vs. control patients (post-intervention mean 35.49 vs. 48.69; p=0.003). Pain was significantly improved (p=0.0186) while function between the two groups was similar (p=0.0727).[348] The other RCT (n=40) compared yoga breathing, but not postures, to a control group that participated in recreational activities. Significant improvements in pain and function occurred at four weeks.[349] A 2025 systematic review of 3 studies (N=116 women) evaluating yoga as a therapeutic modality for fibromyalgia summarized data without meta-analyses or other summary statistics.[350] All studies reported significant improvements on the FIQR in favor of yoga, with three also indicating reduced pain.

One in five patients with fibromyalgia try **acupuncture** within two years of diagnosis,[351] Low-quality evidence suggests that acupuncture may be associated with reduced fibromyalgia-related pain.

A 2013 Cochrane review of nine RCTs with 395 adults with fibromyalgia found reduced pain and stiffness at 1 month with electro-acupuncture compared to either placebo or sham acupuncture, but there were no significant differences in pain, fatigue, or sleep comparing manual acupuncture to placebo or sham acupuncture (4 trials, 182 adults).[351]

Two systematic reviews of four trials of massage suggest improvement for global fibromyalgia symptoms, but unclear benefit on pain and function. The first systematic review identified two small trials of myofascial **massage** that may improve pain over placebo.[352] A 2022 systematic review found two connective tissue massage RCTs that improved global FIQ score but had mixed impact on pain.[330]

A 2024 meta-analysis of 12 studies (N=944) evaluating **TENS** interventions for fibromyalgia found small improvements in pain (SMD -0.61; 95% CI: -1 to -0.16) and disability (SMD -0.27; 95% CI: -0.41 to -0.12) compared to controls.[353] More recently, a 2026 randomized trial adding TENS usage to routine physical therapy found a reduction in movement-evoked pain with TENS that persisted for 6 months.[354] An earlier 2017 review of 6 RCTs, however, failed to show that TENS reduced pain in patients with fibromyalgia.[355]

Cognitive and behavioral interventions

A Cochrane review of 18 low-quality RCTs showed a small benefit from traditional CBT programs on fibromyalgia pain (SMD -0.30; 95% CI: -0.44 to -0.15) and function (SMD -0.31; 95% CI: -0.45 to -0.18).[356] Controls included waitlist controls, active controls, or treatment as usual. Virtual (i.e., remote) delivery of CBT can be effective. A clinical trial comparing 12 weeks of a self-guided “acceptance and commitment” form of behavioral therapy delivered via smartphone to an active control (a symptom tracker) in 275 adults with fibromyalgia found that 71% of those in the active therapy group reported improvement on the Patient Global Impression of Change questionnaire vs. 22% in the active control group.[357]

A 2024 meta-analysis of 10 trials (N=818) assessing the effectiveness of mindfulness meditation (MM) on symptoms of fibromyalgia found low-to-moderate quality evidence that MM improves quality of life, relieves stress, and relieves insomnia and depression in patients with FMS in the short-term.[358] Direct pain outcomes were not assessed in this meta-analysis .In seven RCTs of mindfulness meditation, no reduction in pain was observed. Methods were varied and incorporated different components of mindfulness-based stress relief, CBT, and yoga.[36] In two RCTs, self-management education did not improve pain or disability, as compared to controls.[36]

BOTTOM LINE: Exercise has the most favorable benefit/risk profile for fibromyalgia, with tai chi, yoga, and CBT as potentially helpful adjunctive options. For a complete summary of the non-pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Pharmacologic options

The FDA has approved three medications for the treatment of fibromyalgia: duloxetine, milnacipran and pregabalin. Other options used off-label include gabapentin, amitriptyline, and SSRIs. The effectiveness of the approved medications, however, is not robust. A 2024 Cochrane review of pharmacologic therapies for fibromyalgia (87 trials, N=17,631) reported that good evidence supported the conclusion that about 1 person in 10 with moderate or severe pain could expect pain intensity reduction of at least 50% with duloxetine, milnacipran, or pregabalin.[359]

Acetaminophen and NSAIDs

No data support the efficacy of acetaminophen or NSAIDs for treating pain in patients with fibromyalgia,[360] although they may be useful to treat pain triggers of fibromyalgia.[331]

SNRIs

Duloxetine

A 2014 Cochrane review included six RCTs randomizing 2249 adults with fibromyalgia to duloxetine vs. placebo with 12-week to 6-month follow-up.[361] At 12 weeks, duloxetine was superior to placebo for pain reduction (RR for ≥50% reduction 1.57; 95% CI: 1.2-2.06), with superiority also shown at 28 weeks (RR 1.58; 95% CI: 1.1-2.27).

Milnacipran

In a Cochrane meta-analysis of three RCTs evaluating milnacipran 100 mg daily vs. placebo in 1,925 patients with fibromyalgia, milnacipran was more effective for inducing at least 30% reduction in pain (RR 1.38; 95% CI: 1.22-1.57).[362] A similar effect on pain relief was noted with milnacipran 200 mg daily.

An updated (data through August 2017) Cochrane review identified additional seven trials of duloxetine and nine of milnacipran.[363] The updated analysis did not change findings from previous reviews: both medications were better than placebo in reducing pain by at least 30%. Both medications were also found to improve health-related quality of life, although more SNRI patients dropped out of trials due to adverse events as compared to placebo.

Antidepressants

A meta-analysis of nine trials of the TCA, amitriptyline, found a small improvement in pain (SMD -0.43; 95% CI: -0.75 to -0.11).[364]

A Cochrane review of seven RCTs comparing SSRIs to placebo found a small difference (risk difference 0.1; 95% CI: 0.01-0.20) in patients who reported a 30% pain reduction. SSRIs included in the review included citalopram, fluoxetine, and paroxetine.[365] These data are insufficient to recommend SSRIs for the treatment of pain alone in patients with fibromyalgia.

Membrane stabilizers

Pregabalin

A meta-analysis of five RCTs found pregabalin, overall, had a small effect on pain (SMD -0.28; 95% CI: -0.35 to -0.20). Low doses (150 mg per day) were no different than placebo, but doses of 300 mg daily or greater were more likely to result in a 50% reduction in pain than placebo (RR 1.45; 95% CI: 1.03-2.05).[366]

A small crossover randomized trial with 41 patients with fibromyalgia found that combining pregabalin with duloxetine more effectively reduced pain (68% reporting at least moderate global pain relief) vs. either pregabalin (39%) or duloxetine (42%) alone (P<0.05 for both comparisons with combination).[367]

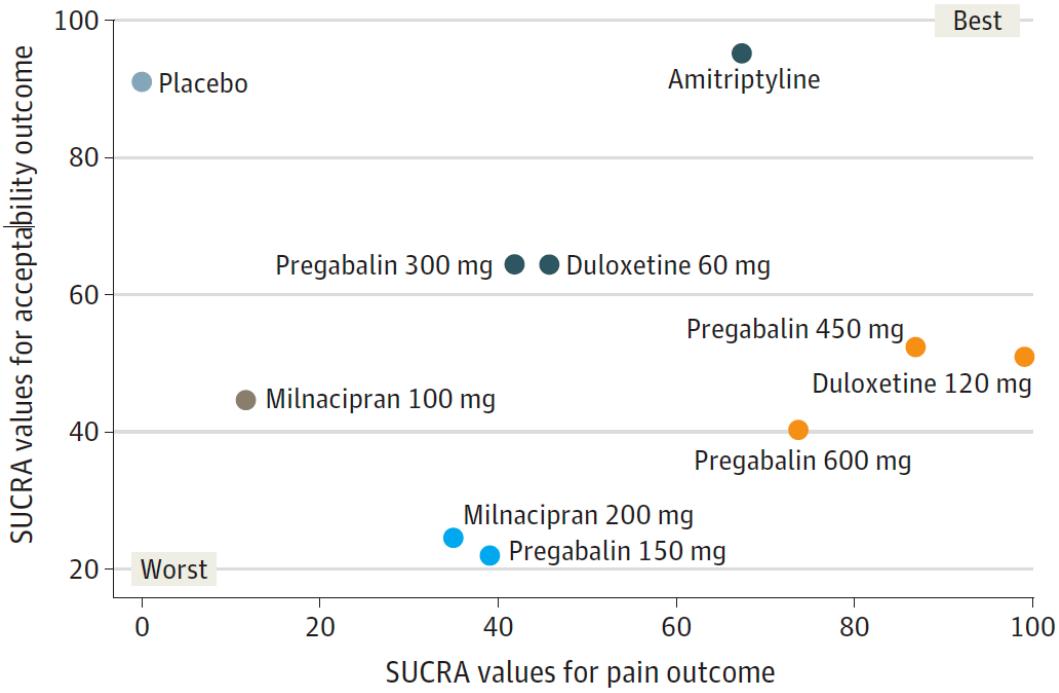
Gabapentin

Evidence supporting the use of gabapentin for fibromyalgia is very limited. In a Cochrane review of RCTs lasting eight weeks or longer (searched through May 2016) two trials were identified. One was only a conference abstract. The other trial randomized 150 patients with fibromyalgia to gabapentin 1200-2400 mg/day vs. placebo for 12 weeks.[368] Gabapentin was associated with a small reduction in pain (mean difference between groups at 12 weeks: -0.92 points on 0-10 point BPI scale; 95% CI: -1.75 to -0.71 points) but this difference may not be clinically important.

Comparing medication options

A network meta-analysis of 35 RCTs in 11,423 adults with fibromyalgia evaluated pain relief with duloxetine, pregabalin, milnacipran, or amitriptyline.[369] Compared to placebo, all of these options provide small, but significant pain relief (SMD range: 0.17-33). A surface area under the cumulative ranking curve (SUCRA) score was calculated to determine the ranking of treatment options on pain relief and side effects, or patient acceptability, by dose given the available data. Plotting SUCRA scores for pain relief and acceptability highlighted the importance of optimizing doses for effect (Figure 17). Pregabalin 450 mg and duloxetine 120 mg were associated with the highest pain reduction. Milnacipran is least likely to be effective compared to other options. While amitriptyline appears very well tolerated and effective, anticholinergic and other side effects limit utility in older adults.[369] All treatments, except amitriptyline, had higher rates of discontinuation due to adverse events than placebo. Also (not in the figure), amitriptyline and duloxetine 120 mg were associated with the highest improvement in quality of life.

Figure 17: Probability of pain relief and patient acceptability by medication and dose[369]



Cannabinoids

A 2020 trial in 17 women with fibromyalgia pain compared a THC-rich cannabis oil (initial dose 1.22mg of THC and 0.02mg of CBD daily, with subsequent increases according to symptoms) vs. placebo.[370] After 8

weeks of treatment the mean FIQ score (0-100 scale) for participants in the THC group dropped from 75.5 to 30.5 ((P<0.001) while mean scores in the placebo group dropped from 70.2 to 61.2 (P<0.07)). Mean scores on a 0-10 pain scale dropped from 8.25 in the THC group to 3.72 (P=0.011) while scores in the placebo group dropped from 8.67 to 7.67 (P=0.235).

Two small trials evaluated the oral cannabinoid nabilone in patients with fibromyalgia (a synthetic form of THC that had been approved by the FDA, but has been discontinued.[371] One trial randomized 46 patients to nabilone 0.5 mg to 1 mg twice daily for 4 weeks vs. placebo and found significant reductions in pain and improvements in anxiety on the Fibromyalgia Impact Questionnaire (P<0.05 for both outcomes).[372] Another trial randomized 31 patients with fibromyalgia and chronic insomnia to nabilone 0.5 mg to 1 mg at bedtime vs. amitriptyline 10-20 mg at bedtime for 4 weeks.[373] Although nabilone was associated with improved sleep quality, no significant effects were reported for pain, mood, or quality of life.

Another trial looked at whether different ratios of THC:CBD impacted pain response. Patients received a high THC option, a product with approximately a 1:1 ratio of THC:CBD, a product with higher CBD to THC ratio, or placebo. All patients received a single dose of each of the products at least two weeks apart and in random order. A significant 30% response to pain was noted with the 1:1 THC:CBD product vs. placebo, but no product provided a 50% or greater pain response that differed from placebo.[374]

Opioid options

Tramadol: One RCT suggests that tramadol plus acetaminophen may reduce pain compared to placebo, but the trial duration was limited to 91 days, and long-term evidence is not available.[375] A review of pharmacologic treatment options suggests short-term improvements in pain and quality of life with tramadol. Patients who do not respond to other treatment options may benefit from a trial of tramadol, with understanding of the limitations of evidence and risks of side effects.

Buprenorphine does not have any data to support its use in fibromyalgia.

Other opioids: A Cochrane review found no RCTs of opioid therapy in patients with fibromyalgia lasting more than eight weeks.[376] An observational study followed a cohort of fibromyalgia patients initiating either opioids or non-opioid treatments for 12 months and found no difference in pain severity between the groups, with less reduction in BPI interference scores in the opioids group.[377] The American Academy of Neurology does not currently recommend opioids for treating fibromyalgia due to the lack of evidence for efficacy and the known risks of harms.[378]

Opioid antagonists

The opioid antagonist naltrexone, which is used at doses ~50 mg for alcohol and opioid use disorders, has been used at low doses (1-6 mg at night) to treat fibromyalgia pain despite a lack of evidence for efficacy. A 2024 trial randomized 99 women with fibromyalgia to either naltrexone (6 mg. daily) or placebo for 12 weeks.[379] At 12 weeks, no significant differences in reported pain were observed. The mean change in pain intensity on a 0-10 scale was -1.3 points (95% CI: -1.7 to -0.8) in the naltrexone group and -0.9 (95% CI: -1.4 to -0.5) in the placebo group.

Muscle relaxants

In 2025 the FDA approved a sublingual 2.8 mg tablet form of the skeletal muscle relaxant cyclobenzaprine for treating fibromyalgia pain.[380] A 2025 meta-analysis of 4 trials (N=1,684) evaluating

once-nightly use of this formulation of cyclobenzaprine found that, compared to placebo, more patients in the cyclobenzaprine group had a ≥ 30% reduction in pain (RR 1.44; 95% CI: 1.15-1.81) and more patients also had a ≥ 50% reduction in pain (RR 1.43; 95% CI: 1.12-1.82).[381] Patients in the cyclobenzaprine group reported more instances of oral side effects (hypoesthesia, paresthesia, and abnormal taste).This agent should be used with caution in older adults and those prescribed other sedating medications.

Pharmacologic summary for fibromyalgia

The European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) guidelines for managing fibromyalgia-related pain recommend beginning with non-pharmacologic approaches (exercise, CBT, acupuncture, yoga, tai chi, and mindfulness) and then advancing to pharmacologic options, with current evidence strongest for duloxetine, milnacipran and pregabalin. Most recommendations were considered weak, with the exception of exercise.[332] In the elderly, duloxetine and pregabalin may be the more favorable pharmacologic options.

BOTTOM LINE: Duloxetine, milnacipran, and pregabalin have the best data for treating fibromyalgia pain. TCAs may be used for younger adults, but should be avoided in older adults due to anticholinergic side effects. Data for the use of low dose naltrexone are promising. For a complete summary of the pharmacologic interventions presented, see Appendix I.

Putting it all together

Managing pain is always challenging, and more so in those with co-occurring conditions, polypharmacy, or physical or cognitive impairments. Clinicians, patients, and caregivers should work together to develop individualized pain treatment plans identifying realistic functional goals and then a pain management strategy to reach those goals. As detailed in this evidence document, pain syndromes respond differently to available pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic treatments, but, in general, non-pharmacologic options (which can be as effective as pharmacologic options) should be tried first. When pharmacologic options are considered, it is important to maximize non-opioid options before prescribing opioids. Opioids are rarely indicated for the treatment of chronic pain conditions. When prescribed, the risk of long-term opioid treatment should be minimized through patient education, screening of high-risk patients for OUD, close monitoring, and careful tapering.

- Work with the patient to formulate a pain management plan that includes clear functional goals and realistic expectations.
- Select evidence-based treatments (non-drug and/or non-opioid) based on the underlying diagnosis. Begin with evidence-based, non-drug options, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, exercise, massage, acupuncture, or tai chi, as appropriate.
- Maximize non-opioid drug options, such as acetaminophen, NSAIDs, or SNRIs.
- Use opioids only when expected benefits outweigh the risks.
- For patients taking opioids chronically, discuss the risks at each visit. Carefully monitor opioid use, related adverse events (mental status changes, constipation, sexual dysfunction), and evidence of dependence or misuse.
- Use caution when escalating an opioid dose above 50 mg MME per day, which increases the risk of overdose or death.
- Taper opioids whenever risks outweigh the benefits.
- Recommend naloxone for all patients or household members with risk factors for overdose.

Appendix I: Evidence for non-pharmacologic and pharmacologic approaches to managing pain

	INTERVENTION	Osteoarthritis	Low back pain	Diabetic neuropathy	Fibromyalgia
Non-drug options	**exercise**	●	●	—	●
	physical therapy	●	◐	—	—
	tai chi	●	●	—	●
	weight loss	◐	—	—	◐
	yoga	◐	●	—	○
	acupuncture	○	●	◐	○
	massage	◐	◐	—	○
	TENS*	○	○	◐	◐
	cognitive behavioral therapy	○	●	—	◐
	mindfulness	◐	●	—	○
	self-management	◐	◐	—	○
Non-opioid drug options	**acetaminophen**	◐	○	—	—
	NSAIDs—oral	●	●	—	—
	NSAIDs—topical	●	○	—	—
	duloxetine (Cymbalta, generics)	◐	●	●	●
	tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs)	—	●	◐	◐
	pregabalin (Lyrica, Lyrica CR)	—	○	●	●
	gabapentin (Neurontin, generics)	—	○	●	◐
	topical lidocaine (Lidoderm, generics)	○	—	○	—
	cannabis/cannabinoids	—	—	◐	○
Opioids	**tramadol** (Ultram)	○	◐	◐	○
	buprenorphine (Belbuca, Butrans)	○	◐	○	—
	other opioids	●	●	●	●

Risk/benefit: ● = favorable; ◐ = potentially favorable; ● = unfavorable; ○ = no clear benefit; — = insufficient data

***TENS:** transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation

Appendix II: Dosing suggestions for selected analgesics

Class	Medication	Starting dose	Frequency	Requires slow titration*	Therapeutic daily dose	Maximum daily dose
Acetaminophen	acetaminophen	325 – 650 mg	every 4-6 hours	No	3000 – 4000 mg	4000 mg (adults – acute) 3250 mg (acute - elderly) 3000 mg (chronic)**
NSAID - oral	celecoxib	100 mg	twice daily	No	200 - 400 mg	400 mg
	ibuprofen	200-400 mg	every 8 hours	No	2400 mg	3200 mg (acute) 2400 mg (chronic) 1200 mg (OTC)
	naproxen	220 -500 mg	every 12 hours	No	1000 mg	1500 mg
NSAID - topical	diclofenac gel 1% #	2-4 grams	every 6 hours	No	16 grams	32 grams (chronic)
	diclofenac patch (Flector)	1 patch	twice daily	No		2 patches (acute)
SNRI	duloxetine	20-30 mg	daily	Every 2 weeks	60-120 mg	120 mg
	milnacipran	12.5 mg	daily or twice daily	Every 2 days	100 – 200 mg	200 mg
TCAs	amitriptyline	10 - 25 mg	nightly	Every 2 weeks	25 – 150 mg	150 mg
	nortriptyline	10 - 25 mg	nightly	Every 2 weeks	25 - 100 mg	200 mg
Anticonvulsants	pregabalin	50-75 mg	Twice or thrice daily	Every 1-2 weeks	300-600 mg	600 mg
	gabapentin	100-300 mg	nightly to every 8 hours	Daily or longer interval as tolerated	900 - 3600 mg	3600 mg
Topicals	lidocaine 5% patch	1 patch	daily	No	1 – 3 patches	3 patches
	lidocaine 4% patch (OTC)	1 patch	daily	No	1 patch	1 patch
	capsaicin (OTC)	1 application	three to four times daily	No	3-4 applications	3-4 applications
	capsaicin patch (OTC)	1 patch for up to 8 hours	daily	No	1 – 4 patches	4 patches per day

References[50,204,278,382-385]

* If No, the dose may be changed with each administration based on patient symptoms ** lower doses may be required in older adults and patients taking certain medications (e.g., anticoagulants) # Diclofenac 3% gel has an indication for actinic keratosis, not pain.

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These are general recommendations only; specific medical decisions should be made by the treating clinician based on an individual patient's clinical condition.

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This material is provided by **Alosa Health**, a nonprofit organization which accepts no funding from any pharmaceutical company.

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This material was supported by the Delaware Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, the New Hampshire Department of Public Health, the Georgia Department of Public Health, the Montgomery County Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services, the Indiana Department of Health, and the Marion County Public Health Department, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A prior version of these materials was supported by the Pharmaceutical Assistance Contract for the Elderly (PACE) Program of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging.

AH-003-0017 Rev 1 Apr 2026