

Relieving your child's pain

As a parent, you are an important member of your child's health care team. Together, we will assess your child's pain and provide relief as quickly and safely as possible.

From the staff of the McMaster Children's Hospital

What is pain?

Pain is a feeling of hurt or discomfort. It can be a signal that an injury has occurred. Pain affects the body and the mind. Worry or anxiety can make pain seem worse. Pain should be relieved or controlled to promote healing.

Each child feels and responds to pain in a different way. Your child's response to pain will depend on many things, such as his or her:

- age and developmental level
 - past experiences with pain
 - feelings, such as anxiety or fatigue
 - ways of coping
 - general health
 - parents' response
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How do we know if your child is in pain?

We can assess your child's pain in three ways:

- watching your child's behaviour
- if he or she is old enough, asking your child about his or her pain
- checking for the physical signs of pain

Watching your child's behaviour

Children in pain may act differently at different ages. Most children will show a combination of signs that they are in pain. If your child is sleeping, he or she may still be feeling pain.

These behaviours are commonly seen when children are in pain:

- crying
 - facial grimacing
 - irritable, restless
 - more easily frustrated or aggressive
 - holding their body rigid
 - refusing to move
 - refusing to eat or drink
 - regressing or returning to behaviours of a younger age
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Other behaviours relate to the child's age:

Infants

- a high pitched cry
- wrinkled forehead and tightly closed eyes
- clenched fists and tightly curled toes
- arched back
- legs pulled up to the body

Toddlers and preschool age children

- being “clingy” - constantly wanting to be held
- not wanting the area to be touched
- refusing to talk
- nightmares

School age children

- holding still or guarding the area that hurts
- showing little emotion
- sleeping more often
- nightmares

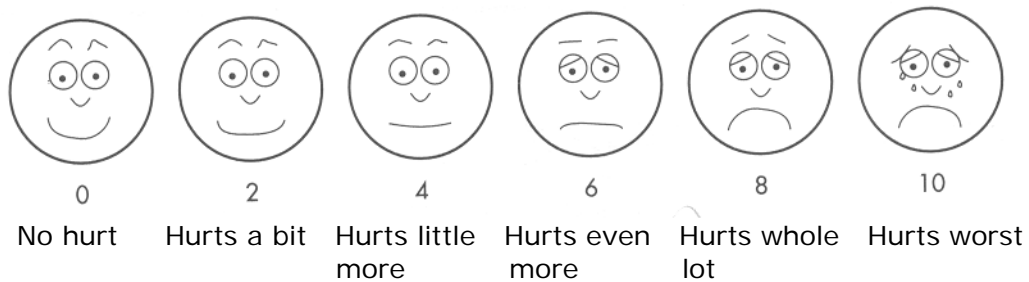
Teenagers

- a change in activity level, eating or sleeping patterns
 - being less cooperative
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Asking your child about pain

Your child may be able to describe where it hurts, how much it hurts and how the pain feels. Your child may also describe feeling sick (nausea).

We may ask your child to rate his or her pain, using this scale of different faces:



Your child can choose the face that best describes his or her pain.

Some children may hesitate to admit that they are having pain. They may:

- fear the treatment for pain
- think they have to be brave
- believe that pain is a punishment

Checking your child for physical signs of pain

Health care providers can check your child for these physical signs of pain:

- changes in heart rate, blood pressure and breathing
 - changes in the amount of oxygen in the blood
 - sweating
 - skin colour
 - tense muscles
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How can parents help?

You know your child best. You are the best person to help your child deal with situations that may be new or uncomfortable. Just being with your child can be comforting. **You can help your child by staying calm.** You can also try to relieve your child's pain by using the comfort measures described in the next section.

You can help the health care providers by telling us:

- when your child is having pain
- about your child and his or her past experiences with pain
- what words and signs your child uses to tell you that he or she is in pain
- how your child usually reacts when in pain
- what pain control methods have or have not worked for your child in the past

We will work together to make decisions about managing your child's pain.

How can we make your child more comfortable?

Children can be fearful in unfamiliar situations and environments. Preparing your child for procedures or activities that could cause pain will help. Members of your child's health care team can help you and your child prepare for these situations. Preparation helps to reduce imagined fears.

When your child is in pain, you and the other members of the health care team may try these things that may help your child feel more comfortable:

- distract your child's attention from the pain with talking, music, TV, songs or games.
 - help your child relax by focusing on deep breathing or blowing bubbles.
 - encourage your child's imagination with drawing or telling stories.
 - use humour to encourage laughter and amuse your child.
 - encourage your child to think positively.
 - help your child get enough rest and sleep. It may help to keep your child's room quiet and limit visitors.
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Ask your nurse if it is safe to:

- hold your child
- help your child get into a comfortable position. Help him or her change positions often.
- help your child stretch, move about or walk around.
- apply heat or cold, or gently rub the painful area.

These comfort measures can help alone, or along with pain medication.

What pain medication will be used?

There are many types of pain medications. The health care team can talk to you about the medications available to help your child. The team will decide when it is safe to give your child pain medication, depending on your child's age and the cause and type of pain.

Parents may worry when their children need strong pain medication such as narcotics. However, it is rare that children become addicted when these medications are given and taken in the right way.

After pain medication is given, the health care providers will assess your child again, to see if the pain is relieved. If there is no relief, a change in medication will be discussed. As your child's pain is reduced, medications may be changed or stopped.

How can we help your child at home?

Continue to use pain relief methods (see list on page 5) at home. Follow the health care team's instructions if you are giving your child pain medication. Give your child pain medication as soon as he or she feels pain. Your child may sleep better if he or she has pain medication at bedtime.

It can help to keep a record of the pain medication you give your child. This can help the health care team in further pain management planning, if needed.

The health care team will help you learn about the pain medication, how to give the medication and what side effects are possible.

Some medications such as codeine may cause constipation. To prevent constipation, give your child lots of fluids and high fibre foods. Foods high in fibre are fruits, vegetables and whole grain cereals and breads. If your child has fewer bowel movements than usual, call your family doctor.

When you are at home, call the family doctor if your child's pain is not relieved or seems to be getting worse.

If you have questions about pain medication, ask your family doctor or the pharmacist at your drug store.

