

PAIN CONTROL

KEY POINTS

- When planning injury pain management, consider an older adult's potential for pain related to coexisting illness and other causes of underlying pain.
- Consider the age-related physiologic changes that affect an older adult's ability to self-report pain, as well as to respond to pain and pain management medications.
- Use an opioid-sparing multimodal strategy to manage pain in older adults, including medications, regional analgesia, complementary physical therapies, and cognitive strategies.

Pain treatment in the geriatric patient is complicated by the presence of coexisting illness, use of concomitant medications, cognitive decline, and depression. Many older adults have a degree of chronic pain that can impair ADLs and ambulation and contribute to underlying depression.¹ Pain may be further exacerbated by deconditioning, gait abnormalities, or injury. Older adults often have several causes of underlying pain even before being injured, including the following:^{2,3}

- Nociceptive pain occurs from actual or threatened tissue damage, such as osteoarthritis.
- Central neuropathic pain may result from damage to the central somatosensory nervous system by conditions such as Parkinson's disease, post-stroke myelopathies, or spinal stenosis.
- Peripheral neuropathic pain may occur from conditions such as postherpetic neuralgia, diabetes, alcoholism, or nerve compression or entrapment.

A complete medical history, including prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, and herbal supplements, is essential to avoid potentially harmful drug-drug interactions.

Assessment

Pain assessment in the adult often focuses on pain presence and the degree of pain. Self-report is the most valid and reliable indicator of pain; however, it may be necessary to ask the older adult about pain in different ways.⁴ Allow time for the older adult to process the question and formulate

an answer. Sensory impairments are common in the older adult, so adjustments such as an enlarged pain assessment tool or better lighting are helpful.

Assess older adults with intact cognitive skills using well-known tools such as a numeric rating scale, the Visual Analogue Scale, and the Defense and Veterans Pain Rating Scale.⁵ Older adults with cognitive impairment from dementia, stroke, and movement disorders have more difficulty communicating their degree of pain. For those with mild dementia, the Numeric Rating Scale and verbal descriptors remain useful for pain assessment. The American Society for Pain Management Nursing recommends a hierarchical pain assessment approach in nonverbal patients:^{6,7}

- Attempt to obtain a self-report of pain
- Look for an underlying cause of pain
- Observe for pain behaviors
- Seek input from family and caregivers

Pain behaviors include guarding, rubbing the affected part, grimacing, and noises or words indicating pain.⁸ While vital sign elevations are not considered a reliable indicator of pain, they may indicate a need for a pain assessment.⁹

To assess patients with severe cognitive impairment, the United Kingdom National Guidelines recommend the use of either the Pain Assessment in Advanced Dementia (PAINAD) scale or DoloPlus-2.^{4,10,11} Other scales for patients with advanced dementia include the Mobilization-Observation-Behaviour-Intensity-Dementia (MOBID-2) Pain Scale and the Pain Assessment Checklist for Seniors with Limited Ability to Communicate (PACSLAC).^{12,13} The MOBID-2 assesses pain related to the musculoskeletal system and from the internal organs, head, and skin. It demonstrated sensitivity in measuring the effects of pain treatment.¹⁴

Medications in the Aging Population

Treat the older adult with an opioid-sparing multimodal strategy, using pharmacologic methods, regional analgesia, and complementary physical and cognitive strategies. The oral route of administration is preferred, and intramuscular injections are avoided. Because of the propensity for constipation in the older adult, any multimodal strategy requires the use of a prophylactic bowel regimen.