

## **Pain Awareness Month: Let's observe and learn.**

by [Teri Robert, PhD](#)

September is National Pain Awareness Month, dedicated to increasing understanding of pain issues and supporting the more than 70 million Americans who suffer from chronic pain daily, according to The National Pain Foundation (NPF), a campaign sponsor.

"A growing body of scientific evidence and literature supports the clinical impression that prolonged pain is aggressive, physically destructive, and an emotionally exhausting disease. Pain can result in measurably harmful changes in hormonal and metabolic functions, alterations of brain chemicals vital to pain modulation, suppression of immune system responses, and interference with gene expression. These are but a few of the dangers that underlie intractable pain of any origin." <sup>4</sup>



Karsten Konderding, MD

*"Ramifications,"* A Newsletter of the Richmond Academy of Medicine

Chronic pain is the number one cause of adult disability in the United States, affecting one in three Americans. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, pain costs the U.S. economy \$100 billion annually in lost workdays, medical expenses and related expenses. Unmanaged pain also wreaks havoc on patients' relationships and careers as well as impacting their families and friends.

"Chronic pain is a serious medical condition that should be treated. As part of National Pain Awareness Month, we encourage people in pain to educate themselves on pain management and alternative treatments. Talk to your doctor and discuss the situation honestly with family and friends. No one should suffer pain needlessly or alone... A multidisciplinary approach to pain treatment and management can help people with pain regain greater control of their daily lives, said Ray. Pain can be managed in a variety of ways, including opioid and non-opioid medications, neuromodulation that employs electrical stimulators for the nervous system, and a wide range of non-traditional methods, including acupuncture, physical therapy, massage and behavioral and psychological treatments that alter the way a person's brain processes pain information."

Albert Ray, MD

NPF Chairman,

past president of the American Academy of Pain Medicine

In the spirit of educating ourselves about pain, here are some facts and suggestions:

### **Some Facts about Pain**

- Chronic pain is a serious public health issue that affects 75 million Americans.
- Pain causes adult disability more than any other condition in the United States.
- Pain costs the US economy \$100 billion in lost productivity each year.
- Chronic pain takes a physical, financial, and emotional toll on those who have pain and their family and friends.
- Chronic pain is related to other health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, fatigue, and sexual dysfunction.

- Persons living in chronic pain make real changes in their lifestyles to accommodate their pain.
- The most common reason a person visits his or her primary care physician is pain.
- Almost 42% of Americans report experiencing pain daily.
- 39% of people in pain say it affects their sleep and 43% say pain affects their mood.
- For almost one-third of people living with pain, their chronic pain is so debilitating that they feel like they don't function normally and sometimes feel so badly that they want to die.
- 37% of persons in pain feel isolated and alone.
- One-third of people living with pain do not believe others understand how much pain they are in.
- 20% of people living with chronic pain have never consulted a doctor about their pain.
- Only 5% of people living with chronic pain have seen a pain specialist.

The American Pain Society (APS) has coined the phrase "Pain: The 5th Vital Sign<sup>TM,2</sup> to elevate awareness of pain treatment among health care professionals. To that end, they encourage health care professionals to:

- consider pain the fifth vital sign and assess patients for pain every time they check for pulse, blood pressure, temperature, and respiration.
- urge their colleagues to take their patients' complaints of pain seriously.
- remind their colleagues not to put patients in the position of asking for a favor when they want pain relief.
- inform patients that they deserve to have their pain evaluated and treated.
- work to implement the *APS Quality Improvement Guidelines for the Treatment of Acute Pain and Cancer Pain* in your own practice setting. (*JAMA*, 274, 1874-1880)

The Joint Commission's\* 2001 pain management standards state that every patient has a right to have his or her pain assessed and treated. These standards also called for pain to be assessed each time vital signs are checked. This reinforces pain as "The Fifth Vital Sign."

### Suggestions

- Embrace each opportunity to learn more about the conditions that cause you pain, pain itself, and pain management.
- When in doubt, ask your doctor. Your doctor can help.
- Remember that chronic pain is often best treated by a pain management specialist.
- If other people in your life don't understand your pain, help them learn more about it.
- Download the Pain Management Tool Kit from [Partners Against Pain<sup>TM</sup>](#). You'll find that it contains many valuable resources.
- If your pain is not well managed, use Pain Awareness Month as motivation to make an appointment with your doctor to address better pain management.

### Summary

There are times when an issue can be captured in a few words. Learning about pain as a means to an end, which in this case is proper pain management, can be captured in this quote:

Knowing is not enough; we must apply.  
Willing is not enough; we must do.  
*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>4</sup>*

\* The Joint Commission, formerly known as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHP), evaluates and accredits nearly 15,000 health care organizations and programs in the United States. This includes hospitals, medical equipment services, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and others. Joint Commission sets standards to address the organizations' level of performance in key functional areas, such as patient rights, patient treatment, and infection control.

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Resources:

<sup>1</sup> [The National Pain Foundation](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The American Pain Society](#)

<sup>3</sup> Press Release. "September is National Pain Awareness Month." National Pain Foundation. Englewood, Colorado. September 5, 2007

<sup>4</sup> [Partners Against Pain™ Pain Management Tool Kit](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The Joint Commission](#)

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