How to Relieve Pain

Strategies You Can Use
Along with Medicine
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What Are Some of the Ways I Can Relieve Pain Without Taking Medicine?

For some people, pain can be relieved without using medicine. They use relaxation, imagery, distraction, and skin stimulation. You may need the help of health professionals to learn to do these for yourself. Friends or family members can help with some of them. The techniques are also helpful when used along with pain medicines.

How Does RELAXATION Work?

Relaxation relieves pain or keeps it from getting worse by reducing tension in the muscles. It can help you fall asleep, give you more energy, and make you feel less tired. It can reduce your anxiety. You may find it makes other pain relief methods work better. Some people, for instance, find that taking a pain medicine or using a cold or hot pack works faster and better when they relax at the same time.

Basic Guidelines For Using RELAXATION Techniques?

⇒ How well you are able to relax may vary from time to time. Relaxation cannot be forced.

⇒ It may take up to two weeks of practice to feel the first results of relaxation.

⇒ Try a few relaxation methods until you find one that works for you.

⇒ Stick with the same method so that it becomes easy and routine for you. Use it regularly for at least 5 to 10 minutes twice a day.

⇒ Check for tension throughout the day by taking note of tightness in each part of your body from head to foot. Relax any tense muscles. You may want to use a quick technique such as inhale/tense, exhale/relax. This is explained on the next page.

⇒ If you have any lung problems, check with your doctor before using any deep breathing techniques.
Is There Any Special Position I Should Be in When I Am Doing RELAXATION Exercises?

Relaxation may be done sitting up or lying down. Choose a quiet place when you can. Close your eyes. Do not cross your arms and legs because that may cut off circulation and cause numbness or tingling. If you are lying down, be sure you are comfortable. Put a small pillow under your neck and under your knees or use a low stool to support your lower legs.

How Do I Use RELAXATION?

There are many methods. Here are some for you to try. Do these exercises for a few seconds up to 10 minutes, based on your need.

Visual concentration and rhythmic massage

Open your eyes and stare at an object, or close your eyes and think of a peaceful, calm scene.

With the palm of your hand, massage near where the pain is in a circular, firm manner. Avoid red, raw, swollen, or tender areas. You may wish to ask a family member or friend to do this for you.

Inhale/tense, exhale/relax

Breathe in (inhale) deeply. At the same time, tense your muscles or a group of muscles. For instance, you can squeeze your eyes shut, frown, clench your teeth, make a fist, stiffen your arms and legs or draw up your arms and legs as tightly as you can.

Hold your breath and keep your muscles tense for a second or two.

Let go! Breathe out (exhale) and let your body go limp.

Slow rhythmic breathing

Stare at an object or close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing or on a peaceful scene.

Take a slow, deep breath and, as you breathe in, tense your muscles (such as your arms).

As you breathe out, relax your muscles and feel the tension draining.

Now remain relaxed and begin breathing slowly and comfortably, concentrating on your breathing, taking about 9 to 12 breaths a minute. Do not breathe too deeply.
To maintain a slow, even rhythm as you breathe out, you can say silently to yourself, “In, one, two, out, one, two.” It may be helpful at first if someone counts out loud for you. If you ever feel out of breath, take a deep breath and then return to the slow breathing exercise. Each time you breathe out, feel yourself relaxing and going limp. If some muscles are not relaxed such as your shoulders, tense them as you breathe in relax them as you breathe out. You need to do this only once or twice for each muscle group.

To end your slow rhythmic breathing, count silently and slowly from one to three. Open your eyes. Say silently to yourself: “I feel alert and relaxed.” Begin moving about slowly.

Other methods you can add to slow rhythmic breathing:

- Imagery - imagine that the air you breathe in blows a healing ball of energy to the site of your pain. Once there, the ball heals and relaxes you. When you breathe out, imagine the air blows the ball away from your body. As it goes, the ball takes your pain with it. (Be careful: Do not blow as you breathe out; breathe out naturally.) Repeat the last two steps each time you breathe in and out. You may imagine that the ball gets bigger and bigger as it takes more and more pain away from your body. To end the imagery, count slowly to three, breathe in deeply, open your eyes, and say silently to yourself: "I feel alert and relaxed." Begin moving about slowly.

- Listen to slow, familiar music through an earphone or headset.

- Progressive relaxation of body parts. Once you are breathing slowly and comfortably, you may relax different body parts. Start with your feet and work up to your head. Think of words such as limp, heavy, light, warm, or floating. Each time you breathe out, you can focus on a certain part of the body and feel it relaxing. Try to imagine that the tension is draining from that part. For instance, as you breathe out, feel your feet and ankles relaxing. The next time you breathe out, feel your calves and knees relaxing, and so on up your body.

Mindfulness Meditation

This technique can induce deep states of relaxation. It can have a similar affect in reducing pain as progressive relaxation and guided imagery. Yet unlike these techniques, in the practice of mindfulness you do not ignore physical sensations, or physical discomfort. Instead you willingly observe them from a center of calmness through non-judgmental moment to moment attention. The main focus would be the sensations such as pressure, burning, pulling, pulsing, etc. The core of mindfulness meditation is being with things just as they are, on purpose, in the present moment. This is done to improve healing and produce a feeling of freedom from pain.
• The Body Scan is a good method to start with for people with chronic pain. Lie in a comfortable position and tune into your breathing. Use your breathing to move your attention slowly and systematically through the body. Try to have moment-to-moment awareness of what you are feeling in the body. As thoughts, feelings, sensations, and sounds come up, practice simply seeing them and letting them be as they are. As you observe the sensations in the hurt area, notice how they are changing. Move slowly, scanning this way through your whole body as best you can. Try to stay with the physical sensations. Avoid dropping away from the “thoughts” or your reactions about the pain. Your relationship to pain is now changing and that can impact everything.

Relaxation tapes:

Ask your doctor or nurse to suggest tapes that you can purchase. These tapes provide step-by-step instructions in relaxation techniques.

Will I Have Any Problems with Using RELAXATION Techniques?

Some people who have used relaxation for pain relief have mentioned these problems. Below are listed these problems and ways to manage them.

• Relaxation may be hard to use with severe pain. If you have this problem, use a quick and easy relaxation method. This includes methods such as visual concentration with rhythmic massage or breathe in/tense, breathe out/relax.

• You may have a feeling of "suffocation." If so, take a deep breath.

• Sometimes breathing too deeply for a while can cause shortness of breath. If this is your problem, take shallow breaths. It may also help to breathe more slowly.

• You may fall asleep. If you do not wish to fall asleep, sit in a hard chair while doing the exercise or set a timer or alarm.

• You might get feelings of depression or withdrawal. Sometimes being relaxed makes you aware of problems you did not realize were bothering you. If this happens, talk to someone who can help you sort out your feelings.

If you have trouble using these methods, ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a therapist who can help with these techniques. Do not keep doing any relaxation technique that makes your pain worse. Also do not keep doing any technique that makes you feel uneasy, or causes any unpleasant effects.
What Is DISTRACTION and How Does It Work?

Distraction means turning your focus to something other than the pain. Many people use this method without knowing it. It is done when they watch television or listen to the radio to "take their minds off" the pain.

Distraction may work better than medicine if pain is sudden and intense or if it is brief, lasting only 5 to 45 minutes. It is useful when you are waiting for pain medicine to start working. If pain is mild, you may be able to distract yourself for hours.

Some people think that a person who can be distracted from pain does not have severe pain. This is not necessarily true. This technique can be a powerful way of relieving even the most intense pain for a short amount of time.

How Can I Use DISTRACTION?

Any activity that keeps your attention can be used. If you enjoy working with your hands, crafts such as needlework, model building, or painting may be useful. Losing yourself in a good book might divert your mind from the pain. Going to a movie or watching television are also good distraction methods. Slow, rhythmic breathing can be used to distract you as well as for relaxation.

You may find it helpful to listen to rather fast music through a headset or earphones. To help keep your focus on the music, tap out the rhythm. You can adjust the volume to match the intensity of pain, making it louder for very severe pain. Doing this does not take much energy, so it may be very useful when you are tired.
What Is SKIN STIMULATION?

How Do I Use Massage?

For pain relief, massage works best when slow, steady, circular motions are used. You can massage over or near the site of the pain with just your bare hand. You may wish to use any substance that feels good such as talcum powder, warm oil, or hand lotion. Depending upon where your pain is, you may massage the site yourself or ask a family member or friend to give you a massage. Having someone give you a foot rub, back rub, or hand rub can be very relaxing and may relieve pain. Some people find brushing or stroking lightly feels better than deep massage. Use the method that works best for you.

NOTE: If you are having radiation therapy, avoid massage in the treatment area.

How Do I Use Pressure?

Pressure can be applied with the entire hand, the heel of the hand, the fingertip, the knuckle, or the ball of the thumb. Pressure can be applied by using one or both hands to encircle your arm or leg. Try applying pressure for about 10 seconds to different areas over or near your pain to see where it might help. You can also feel around your pain and outward to see if you can find "trigger points." These are small areas under the skin that are very sensitive or that trigger pain. Pressure works best if it is applied as firmly as possible without causing pain. You can use pressure for up to about 1 minute. This will often relieve pain for minutes to several hours after the pressure is released.

How Do I Use Vibration?

Vibration over or near the site of the pain may bring short term relief. For example, the scalp attachment of a hand-held vibrator often relieves a headache. For low back pain, a long, slender battery-operated vibrator placed at the small of the back may be helpful. You may use a vibrating device such as a small battery-operated vibrator, a hand-held electric vibrator, a large heat-massage electric pad, or a bed vibrator.
**Which Is Better for Relieving Pain - Cold or Heat?**

As for any of the techniques described, you should use what works best for you. Heat often relieves sore muscles; cold lessens pain by numbing the area. Many people with prolonged pain use only heat and have never given cold a try. Some people find that cold relieves pain faster, and relief may last longer.

**What Are Some Comfortable and Easy Ways to Use Cold or Heat?**

For cold, try gel packs that are sealed in plastic and remain soft and flexible even at freezing temperatures. Gel packs can be found at drugstores and medical supply stores. They can be reused and kept in the freezer when not in use. Wrap the pack with a layer of towels so that it is not too cold for you. An ice pack or ice cubes wrapped in a towel can work just as well.

To use heat for pain relief, a heating pad that makes its own moisture (hydrocolater) is handy. Gel packs heated in hot water, hot water bottles, a hot, moist towel, a regular heating pad, hot bath or shower can also be used to apply heat. For aching joints, such as elbows and knees, you can wrap the joint in lightweight plastic wrap (tape the plastic to itself). This retains body heat and moisture.

**NOTE:** Do not use heat or cold over any area being treated with radiation.

**How Do I Use Menthol Preparations?**

First, test your skin by rubbing a small amount of the menthol preparation in a circle about 1 inch wide on the site of the pain or the part you want to be stimulated. This will let you know whether the menthol does not feel good to you or irritates your skin. If the menthol does not create a problem, rub some more into the area. The sensation caused by the menthol slowly increases. It can remain up to several hours. To increase how intense the feeling is or how long the menthol is felt, you can open your skin pores with heat (shower, sun) wrap a plastic sheet over the site after rubbing in the menthol. Don't use a heating pad because it may cause a burn. If you're afraid others will not like the odor, you can use the menthol product when you are alone or perhaps in the evening or through the night.

**NOTE:** Many menthol preparations contain an ingredient similar to aspirin. A small amount of this aspirin-like substance is absorbed through the skin. If you have been told not to take aspirin, do not use these preparations until you check with your doctor.
What Precautions Should I Take If I Use Skin Stimulation?

Heat and cold can easily damage your skin. It is easy to burn the skin with hot water from the tap or with settings too high on the heating pad. Extreme cold can also burn your skin.

⇒ Never use a heating pad on bare skin.
⇒ Never go to sleep for the night with the heating pad on.
⇒ Be very careful while using a heating pad if you are taking drugs or medicines that make you sleepy or if you do not have much feeling in the area.
⇒ Limit the time heat or cold is applied to 5 to 10 minutes.
⇒ Do not use heat or cold over any site where your circulation or sensation is poor.
⇒ If you start to shiver when using cold, stop using it right away.
⇒ Do not use cold so intense or for so long that the cold itself causes pain.
⇒ Do not use heat over a new injury. Heat can increase bleeding. Wait at least 24 hours.
⇒ Do not rub menthol preparations over broken skin, a skin rash, or mucous membranes (such as inside your mouth or around your rectum). Make sure you do not get the menthol in your eyes.
⇒ Avoid massage and vibration over red, raw, tender, or swollen sites.
⇒ If skin stimulation increases your pain, stop using it.
⇒ As noted earlier, if you are undergoing (or have undergone) radiation treatments, do not use any skin stimulation method without first checking with your doctor or nurse.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright ©11/2015. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4448.