



Understanding Pain

Pain is typically described in three ways: the why, where and what of pain.

1. The reason why there is pain or the cause (such as tissue injury, a burn, a fall etc.),
2. Where the pain is or by its location (such as back pain), and
3. What type of pain it is (such as shooting pain or burning pain) and its frequency (such as how long it has lasted).

Pain is a distressing experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage that is influenced by our sensory, emotional, psychological, cognitive and social processes. It can be difficult to express the pain we feel in words.

The why (the cause)

Pain can be described by the mechanism or the cause of the pain in which it is created by the body, such as nociceptive or neuropathic pain. A newer term being used is nociplastic pain.

Nociplastic pain

Our understanding of how pain works is always evolving. A recently adopted term to describe some types of chronic pain is “nociplastic”. Nociplastic pain is caused by neurological dysfunction (nervous system sensitisation), but without evidence of nerve damage. A more familiar way to describe nociplastic pain may be ‘central sensitisation’ (when a person becomes more sensitive to pain). Examples of nociplastic pain include: fibromyalgia, tension headaches, complex regional pain syndrome (type 1), and some chronic lower back pain. The term “nociplastic” is not yet widely used in residential aged care, but as it becomes more accepted, categorising pain into three types (nociceptive, neuropathic, nociplastic) will become widespread.

Nociceptive pain	Neuropathic pain
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caused by tissue injury (e.g. a cut or sprain)• Usually is associated with some degree of inflammation• Most common type of pain• Often acute pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caused by nerve damage (a lesion or disease of the nervous system, e.g. in post shingles pain (post herpetic neuralgia) or diabetic neuropathy)• Often chronic pain
<p>Cancer pain can be nociceptive, neuropathic, or a combination of these.</p>	

The where (location)

The three most common sites of pain in older people are:

- The back
- Leg, knee or hip
- Other joints

The what (acute vs chronic)

Pain can be distinguished by what type of pain it is, such as acute or short-term pain, recurrent pain, and chronic long term or persistent pain.

Acute pain

- Short term and temporary
- Stops at end of harmful event (disease recovery or healed injury)
- Useful for determining issues in the body
- Useful for informing treatment

Recurrent pain

- Acute pain that comes and goes, e.g. rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis, as the disease fluctuates

Chronic pain

- Injury has healed, but pain persists beyond the normal period of healing
- Pain occurs most days for 3+ months
- May not respond to pain medications
- Serves no useful purpose