

Pain After Stroke

Experiencing pain within days, weeks or months after a stroke is very common. Pain can slow your recovery, interfere with your daily activities, and lower your quality of life. Each person feels pain differently. Sometimes stroke damage to the brain can cause a normal touch feel painful.

In general, stroke survivors experience two types of pain:

1. **Local Pain** – often results from the unusual positioning of a joint due to spasticity, paralysis or muscle tightness. The shoulder joint is most commonly involved.
2. **Central Pain** – Central post-stroke pain (CPSP) is also known as thalamic syndrome or thalamic pain syndrome. This type of pain is constant, moderate or severe pain caused by damage to the brain. After a stroke, the brain may not correctly interpret the messages sent from the body in response to touch, warmth, cold and other stimuli. Instead, the brain registers even slight sensations in the skin as painful. This type of pain typically occurs more than one month after the stroke, and may seem to be unrelated. Only about 8% of stroke survivors experience CPSP.

Features of Pain after Stroke:

- Constant (chronic)
- Comes and goes
- Pain in one side of body (affected by stroke)
- Aching, burning, sharp, stabbing, itching
- Feel more pain with emotional stress, cold or movement
- Experience normal touch as unpleasant and painful

Who Can Help?

- General physician
- Neurologist – specializes in stroke and other disease of brain & spinal cord
- Psychiatrists – specializes in physical medicine
- Physical therapist
- Occupational therapist
- Psychologist

Treatment:

Report symptoms of pain to your healthcare provider. Keeping a pain diary is helpful so that your healthcare provider understands the type of pain you are experiencing. Note the following:

- What part of your body is the pain felt
- What triggered the pain (touching, temperature changes, etc...)
- What made it better
- How often it occurs & how long it lasts

Your treatment may include medications along with complementary medicine such as massage, or physical therapy. Standard over-the-counter treatments and prescription pain relief drugs have limited success in relieving stroke-related pain. Medications used to treat stroke-related pain may include antidepressant, anti-seizure and anti-spasticity medications.

Managing Your Pain at Home:

- Avoid things that cause pain (temperature changes, tight clothing, etc...)
- Correctly position affected extremities to reduce discomfort (may include use of a splint or a sling for shoulder support)
- While sitting/lying use armrest or pillow under weakened arm to relieve shoulder pain
- Use heat
- Exercises as prescribed by your therapist
- Stay active
- Try relaxation or meditation techniques
- If the pain persists and/or affects your daily activities call your doctor

References:

1. National Stroke Association
2. www.stroke.org