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INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS

Effective & safe use of opioids for post-surgical pain

■ What can your child expect after surgery?

It's normal for a patient to experience some level of discomfort after surgery. People can experience and express pain differently. Factors that affect how much and how long your child will experience pain include:

- Age and developmental stage
- Previous experiences with pain
- Nature of the surgery
- Feelings, thoughts, and understanding of pain
- The type of procedure, and any pre-existing conditions/injuries

■ How do I know my child is in pain?

Your child may let you know when they have pain by using words or showing you where they feel pain. You can also ask your child if and where they feel pain. They may use words like 'a little', 'medium', or 'a lot' to tell you how much pain they have.

If your child cannot describe their pain using words, watch for behaviours, such as:



grimacing



refusing to eat



irritability



teeth grinding



crying &
whimpering



avoiding
movement of a
body part

Your child may rate their pain on a faces scale.

How to use this scale:

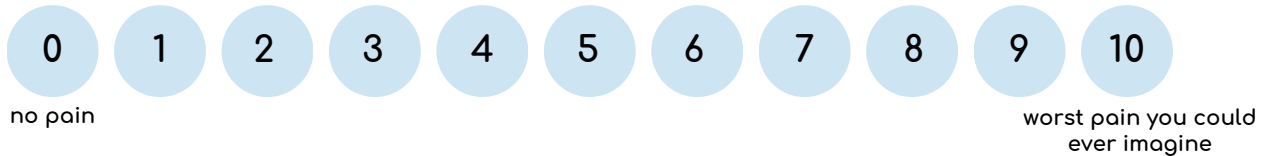
In the following instructions, say "hurt" or "pain," whichever seems right for a particular child. "These faces show how much something can hurt. This face [point to left-most face] shows no pain. The faces show more and more pain [point to each from left to right] up to this one [point to right-most face] - it shows very much pain. Point to the face that shows how much you hurt [right now]."



Faces Pain Scale – Revised, ©2001, International Association for the Study of Pain

Your child may rate their pain on a numeric scale.

"How much pain or hurt do you have on a scale from 0 to 10?"



Learn more about how acute pain varies at different development stages

[Infants & Toddlers](#)

[Young Children](#)

[Older Children](#)

[Teens](#)

REMEMBER: Pain isn't always visible. Just because your child may not show signs of pain does not mean they are not feeling any!



Why is it important to treat your child's pain?

Children have a right to proper pain management. Even though pain after surgery is common and usually only lasts a short period, it's important to manage your child's pain. Treating your child's pain will help them return to their everyday activities sooner.

If their pain isn't managed well, children can experience short- and long-term issues:

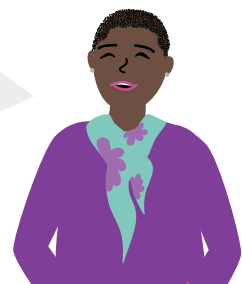
Short-term issues

- Becoming more sensitive to pain
- Behavioural regression
- Increased duration of hospitalization
- Disruption of family's daily life and stress

Long-term issues

- Mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress)
- Using substances to cope with untreated pain
- Avoiding health care and not trusting health professionals
- Pain may become chronic

Maintain open communication between your child and the healthcare team (e.g. pharmacist, physical therapist, primary care provider). Raise questions and concerns if you do not feel that your child's pain is adequately managed.



What are helpful ways to reduce pain?

When pain is mild, it can often be managed using physical and psychosocial strategies alone, without the need for medications. These strategies can also be used to decrease the amount of pain medications required for moderate and severe pain.

Physical strategies



Hold and rock your child to provide comfort



Ice



Heat pack



Movement
unless your healthcare team has instructed to limit movement.

Psychosocial strategies



Mindfulness



Belly breathing



Distractions

Examples of distraction vary by age, and can include:



Blowing bubbles



Talking to family & friends



Music



iPad

Pharmacological strategies

Medications can help reduce your child's pain after surgery. Pain can be treated safely using a combination of medications that each work differently, using a step-wise approach:

	TYPE	PURPOSE	EXAMPLES
non-opioid medications	Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (oral)	To treat mild and moderate pain.	Ibuprofen (e.g. Advil®, Motrin®)
	Acetaminophen		Tylenol®
opioids	Opioids	To treat moderate to severe pain.	Morphine

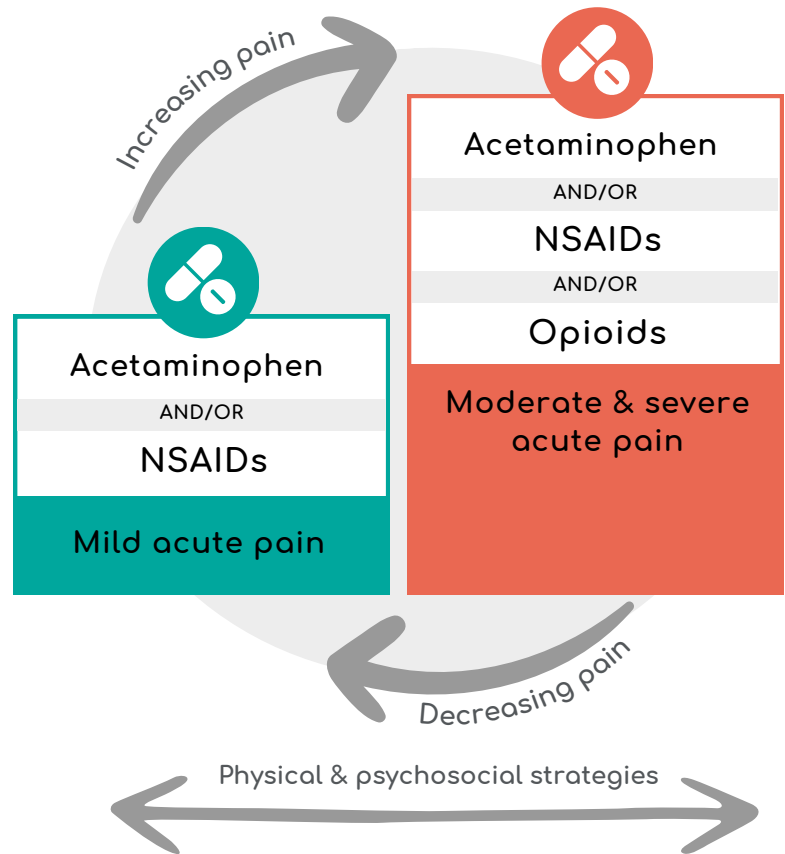


Always follow your prescriber's instructions. If you have any questions or concerns, please ask your healthcare team.

The step-wise approach

If your child has pain, you may be instructed to give them acetaminophen and/or NSAIDs regularly for the first few days. It is safe to take these two medications together.

Using non-opioid medications can help reduce the amount of prescribed opioid your child needs during their recovery. For moderate and severe acute pain, your child may initially need stronger pain medications such as opioids in addition to non-opioid medication.



Using opioids

Opioids should be used to treat moderate to severe pain when non-opioid medications are not enough to manage pain. The benefits of opioids can outweigh the risks when opioids are taken properly for medical reasons. Following most surgical procedures or simple procedures or injuries, most children will need 3 days or less of opioid medications at home.

Common side effects of opioids

Common side effects	How to manage them
Constipation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase fibre intake through a balanced diet • Drink plenty of fluids (including popsicles) • Use laxatives, if needed under the guidance of your child's healthcare team
Nausea and vomiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take medication with food • Use anti-nausea medications, if needed under the guidance of a health professional • Use home remedies (e.g. consume ginger)
Drowsiness and sedation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid participating in activities that require alertness • Work with your healthcare team to adjust the dosage as needed • If your child is difficult to wake up, seek medical attention and stop giving opioids
Itching and skin rash	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your child's prescriber may recommend antihistamines (anti-itch) or other appropriate interventions (e.g. apply a cream)
Slow or shallow breathing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek immediate medical attention
Tolerance and dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your child's prescriber may choose to adjust your child's medication dose to ensure adequate pain relief.

When to stop using opioids

Stop using opioids once the pain lessens and your child does not need any opioids. If your child's pain persists or get worse, do not ignore it! Reach out to a member of your child's healthcare team.

Risks of using opioids to manage pain

Opioids can be safely used to treat moderate to severe pain as prescribed without complications. Some caregivers have valid concerns about using opioids to treat pain in children due to potential side effects and other harms.



There is no direct evidence that short-term opioid use is associated with problematic long-term opioid use. Using opioids as prescribed for pain relief is not a drug-seeking behaviour.

Signs of opioid overdose & oversedation

	Excessive drowsiness / difficulty staying awake
	Slowed breathing (quick, brief breaths)
	Persistent vomiting
	Weakness or limpness in the body
	Constricted pupils (very small pupils)
	Blue or pale lips and fingertips
	Cold or clammy skin

If you think your child is breathing very slowly or appears overly sedated on opioids, call Emergency Services immediately.

Opioid Safety

Safe use

- ✓ Follow the prescriber's dosage instructions when giving medications to your child.
- ✓ If your child does not feel their pain is getting better, or there are side effects to the medication(s), work with their health team to change the treatment plan.
- ✓ Give opioids only to the person who was prescribed the medication.
- ✓ Use a measuring device (e.g. dosing syringe, cup) if given, for accurate dosing.
- ✓ Monitor your child's pain levels and schedule regular check-ins with your healthcare team. Consider tracking your child's pain with a pain diary or medication log.

Safe storage

- ✓ Store opioids in a locked cabinet or container in a secured location.
- ✓ Keep opioids out of reach of children and pets.
- ✓ Keep opioids in their original prescription containers.
- ✓ Store opioids at the recommended temperature as stated on the label.

Safe disposal

- ✓ Before discarding the container, remove your child's personal information from the container to protect your child's privacy.
- ✓ Return any unused or expired opioids to your pharmacy.

Keep these contact numbers easily accessible

If you have a question or concern, contact a member of your healthcare team!



Prescriber's name:

Prescriber's number:

Pharmacist's name:

Pharmacist's number:

Disclaimer: This resource is for informational purposes only, it is not meant to replace medical advice from a healthcare provider. If you wish to adapt this resource to use at your own institution, please email contact@kidsinpain.ca to seek permission.

This information sheet was designed as a companion document to 'Effective and Safe Use of Opioids for Post-Surgical Pain - Pearls for Prescribers'. The guidance in these documents align with section 5 of the Health Standards Organization's Pediatric Pain Management standard (CAN/HSO 13200:2023).

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