

Recommendations for Pain Assessment in Cognitively Impaired Older Adults

General Recommendations

1. Pain is highly prevalent in persons with dementia. Behavioral symptoms are often pain indicators.
2. Behavior observation scores should be considered alongside knowledge of existing painful conditions and reports from someone who knows the older adult and their pain behaviors.
3. Use assessment approaches that include both self-report and observational measures when possible.
4. The Numeric Rating Scale (NRS) and the Verbal Descriptor Scale (VDS) or Pain Thermometer should be attempted with older adults whose cognitive functioning ranges from intact to mildly or moderately impaired. The Faces Pain Scale-Revised (FPS-R) is an alternate tool that is preferred by some older adults, particularly African-Americans and Asians.
5. The Pain Assessment in Advanced Dementia (PAINAD) is recommended for monitoring directly observable behaviors on a regular basis in older adults with chronic pain. The Pain Assessment Checklist for Seniors with Limited Ability to Communicate (PACSLAC) is recommended as a screening tool to monitor older adults for development of behaviors that may be pain-related and thus is not a definitive indicator of pain.
6. Understand that all observational tools seek to document behaviors that may be pain-related. Scores generated from these instruments do not represent pain intensity and must be interpreted at the individual level only.
7. Pain assessment during a movement (such as transferring, bathing, dressing, and ambulating) is more likely to identify an underlying persistent pain problem than observation at rest.
8. Attempt an analgesic trial to help determine if pain is the cause of behaviors that may be pain-related. If the use of analgesic medications leads to a reduction of potential behavioral indicators of pain, continue to treat the behaviors as if they are pain-related.
9. A comprehensive pain assessment should also include evaluations of impact of pain on related aspects of the older adult's functioning (e.g. associated symptoms, sleep disturbance, appetite changes, physical activity changes, concentration, and relationships with others).
10. Several instruments contain items that need to be assessed over time (e.g., changes in sleeping, eating). A tool that screens for changes in behavior, such as the PACSLAC, can be helpful in monitoring these changes.

Specific Recommendations Following the Selection of Suitable Assessment Tools

1. Use an individualized approach to collecting baseline scores for each older adult.
2. Solicit the assistance of caregivers familiar with the older adult.
3. If assessment tools are used to monitor pain levels over time, they must be used under consistent circumstances (e.g., during a structured program of physiotherapy, over the course of a typical evening). The same pain assessment tool should be used (prior to and after intervention) when evaluating pain interventions.

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