

# Non-pharmacological Pain and Symptom Management

## OVERVIEW

**NOTE: The clinician should only administer non-pharmacological therapies that are within their particular scope of practice. Follow the policies and procedures of your organization regarding administration of non-pharmacological therapies.**

Examples of non-pharmacological (non-drug) therapies – treatments, modalities, activities, and experiences that help provide relief of physical and psychological symptoms either without the use of medication, or in addition to pharmacological treatment.

There are two key categories of therapies:

1. Physical
2. Psychological

### Physical non-pharmacological interventions

- Massage
- Cold and Heat
- Positioning

### Psychological non-pharmacological therapies

- Distraction
- Relaxation
- Music
- Healing Touch
- Controlled breathing and guided imagery

Mild-to-moderate pain may be relieved by non-pharmacological techniques alone.

Moderate-to-severe pain may require medication in addition to non-pharmacological techniques.

### **Advantages of non-pharmacological interventions:**

- Low cost
- Low risk of side effects
- Decreases insomnia, anxiety, depression, or behavioral symptoms
- Promotes a sense of personal control and hope
- Promotes improvement in quality of life

### **Potential disadvantages of non-pharmacological interventions**

- Common misconceptions may keep older adults and clinicians from trying the techniques. Some common misunderstandings are:
  - Non-pharmacological techniques *always* decrease pain intensity for most older adults.
    - Correction: Non-pharmacological techniques *can* decrease pain intensity and can decrease awareness of pain to enable better coping.
  - Non-pharmacological approaches are well-researched.

- Correction: Some have strong evidence to support their use while others are less well studied.
- Non-pharmacological measures should be used *instead* of pain medication.
  - Correction: Moderate-to-severe pain typically requires a combination of medication and non-pharmacological therapy.
- Non-pharmacological techniques that work on the skin *must be used* over the site of pain.
  - Correction: Hot and cold can work when applied to the opposite side of the body, or at a different site, enabling these techniques to be used when radiation therapy or open wounds prohibit use at the site of pain.
- If an older adult can be distracted from pain, the *pain is not severe*.
  - Correction: Distraction can decrease pain and increase ability to cope. Successful distraction does not mean pain severe, present or real.

### Questions to consider before starting non-pharmacological therapy:

- What is the older adults' attitude toward non-pharmacological therapy?
  - Does he/she have misunderstandings?
- Does he/she understand why the therapy is being suggested?
  - Provide rationale for therapy being suggested.
- What non-pharmacological treatment has he/she used previously? Did the treatment work?
- If the prior treatment did not work, consider using a different therapy.
- Is the family involved and available? Can the older adult participate without family support?
- What education is needed?
- Is the older adult or family member able to understand and follow through with the therapies?
- Who is responsible for providing the therapies? Is there an additional cost to the therapy?
  - If the older adult is not responsible for initiating the therapy, how will he/she gain access to the therapy?

Revised April 2023

### References:

Bruckenthal P. Marion MA. Snelling L. Complementary and Integrative Therapies for Persistent Pain Management in Older Adults: A Review. (2016). Journal of Gerontological Nursing.42(12): 40-48.

<https://journals.healio.com/doi/full/10.3928/00989134-20161110-08>

Horgas, Ann L. PhD, RN, FGSA, FAAN; Bruckenthal, Patricia PhD, APRN-BC, FAAN; Chen, Shaoshuai MS, BSN, RN; Herr, Keela A. PhD, RN, AGSF, FGSA, FAAN; Young, Heather M. PhD, RN, FAAN; Fishman, Scott MD. Assessing Pain in Older Adults. AJN, American Journal of Nursing 122(12):p 42-48, December 2022. | DOI: 10.1097/01.NAJ.0000904092.01070.20

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). NCCIH. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). Pain: You can get help. National Institute on Aging. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/pain-you-can-get-help>