



*A Hands On Approach for Pain Management:*  
Tips for Overcoming the Challenges of  
Communicating about Pain with Your Patients

the pain experience  
is unique



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is one of the best tools  
you have to help patients  
manage their pain



to each patient



## Chronic pain is one of the most common reasons why people seek medical attention.

According to the Institute of Medicine, over 100 million adults in the United States suffer from common chronic pain conditions.<sup>1</sup>

It's also one of the most challenging medical conditions to address – there are no tools to measure it objectively, and the pain experience is unique to each patient.<sup>2</sup> If untreated or undertreated, pain can lead to complications such as reduced function and mobility, a weakened immune system, anxiety and depression.<sup>3</sup>

As a healthcare professional, effective communication is one of the best tools you have to help patients manage their pain. Studies have shown that effective communication improves patient satisfaction and adherence to treatment plans, while decreasing chances of missed diagnoses.<sup>4</sup>

There are many challenges that can interfere with an open and honest dialogue about chronic pain. These range from patients' inability to find the right words to describe pain, or examples of how the pain interferes with their daily activities, to the limited time available during typical medical appointments. It's vital to overcome these challenges because a productive dialogue is crucial to developing an individualized long-term treatment plan for each patient.

The following communication tips may help enhance your skills in establishing and maintaining productive exchanges with your patients so they view you as a receptive, trusted partner.



## How You Say Something Matters Just as Much as What You Say

Nonverbal communication ranges from the importance of your delivery, such as tone, energy and facial expressions, to your stance and overall demeanor. Patients pick up cues from your body language that can enhance – or diminish – these important personal interactions.

### First impressions

It's so easy to be wrapped up in thoughts as you move from one exam room to the next, but the first impression goes a long way toward a positive interaction. As you enter the exam room, welcome your patient (and anyone they've brought along to the appointment) with a warm, enthusiastic greeting.

### Establish and maintain eye contact

Facing your patient and sitting at the same eye level can help put him or her at ease and create a collaborative experience. This added comfort level may encourage patients to be more open and honest about their pain experience.

Should you need to enter information into a written or electronic chart, remember to look directly at your patient often so the human connection doesn't get lost in the documentation process. Not only will this reassure your patient that you are actively listening, it will also help you focus on the various ways they are communicating to you – through words, tone and body language.

### Convey positive body language

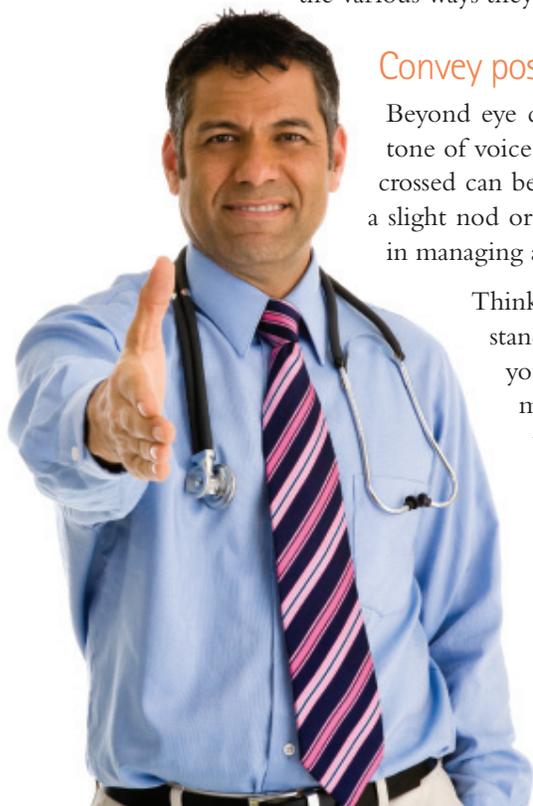
Beyond eye contact, be aware of how your body language, facial expressions and tone of voice might be perceived by your patient. For example, standing with arms crossed can be interpreted as a personal barrier or a sign of impatience. Alternately, a slight nod or gentle smile can underscore your role as a trusted, receptive partner in managing a patient's pain.

Think about your physical location in the exam room. For example, if you're standing with your hand on the doorknob, your patient may think that you're pressed for time – or would rather be somewhere else. The communication consequence is that the patient might be less likely to open up, may get flustered by trying to talk quickly and miss important points, or may become reluctant to ask questions.

### Emphasize active listening

A patient may need to 'search' for the right words to convey details or insights about his or her pain experience, so the presentation of information might take time to unfold. Try to find the right moments to ask questions that will advance the conversation and clarify what your patient is saying without interrupting or completing the patient's thoughts or sentences.

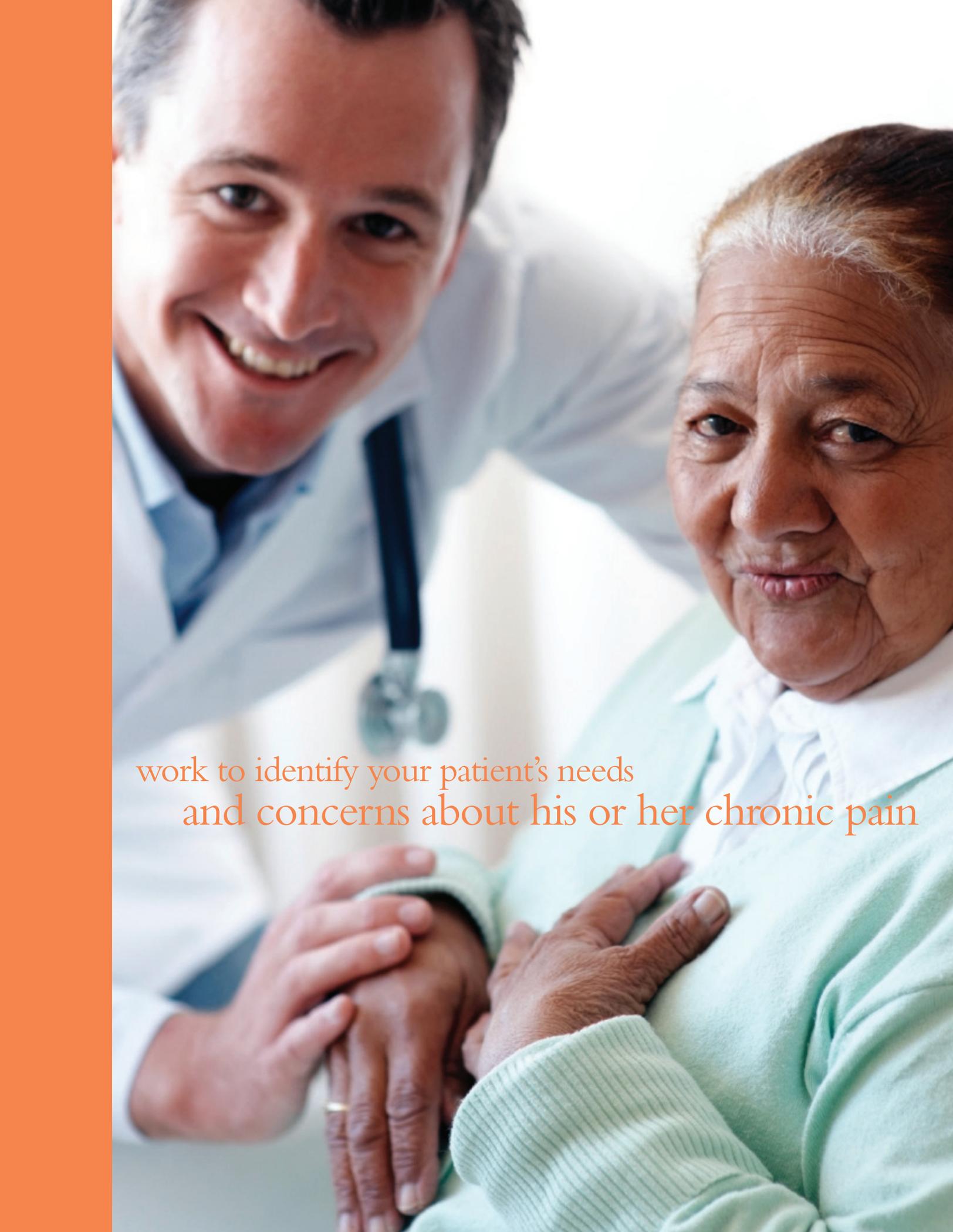
Asking questions serves many purposes – it can clarify your understanding of what is being relayed, confirm that you are interpreting a patient's experience properly, and show that you are fully engaged.



A warm, enthusiastic greeting goes a long way toward a positive interaction with your patient.



remember to look  
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A male doctor in a white coat and stethoscope is smiling and holding the hands of an elderly female patient in a light green hospital gown. The doctor is leaning over the patient, and they are both looking towards the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

work to identify your patient's needs  
and concerns about his or her chronic pain

## Treating Chronic Pain Patients as Individuals

Today the average medical appointment lasts about 18 minutes,<sup>5</sup> and many pain patients often need to talk to you about other conditions at the same time. This kind of time pressure can make it difficult for your patient to fully explain how pain is *really* impacting his or her life so you can develop an individualized treatment plan.

### Create a shared agenda

Work collaboratively to identify your patient's needs and concerns about his or her chronic pain upfront. Understand what your patient wants to accomplish during the appointment and offer your thoughts on what is achievable. Often a healthcare professional has a clear idea of what "should" be discussed during an appointment but doesn't share this with the patient, and patients may do the same.

Having a clear agenda in place can help with decision making and can make your patient feel actively involved in the treatment process and improve the efficiency of pain management appointments.

### Probe to learn

A patient may have difficulty sharing and/or articulating his or her experience with pain. Asking probing questions can help the conversation along and help both of you make an informed decision on a long-term treatment plan. Below are some ideas to consider:

- ✓ What is your patient currently doing to treat his or her pain? Make sure to find out about all the ways the patient seeks relief: prescription and over-the-counter medications, and all other physical or complementary techniques. These could range from physical therapy, exercise, acupuncture or massage, to use of herbs and nutritionals.
- ✓ How is the pain impacting your patient's life/what is your patient no longer able to do because of the pain, e.g., working, sleeping, participating in social/family functions, exercising?
- ✓ What activities/hobbies does your patient want to get back to but can't because of pain? These can be simple tasks like cooking or gardening – or major goals like returning to work. Knowing this information can help you collaborate to set an achievable benchmark to work against when developing a long-term treatment plan.

### Discuss and explain treatment options

Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to pain management, it's important to convey to your patient that individualized treatment plans may include a combination of medicines and complementary techniques such as yoga, acupuncture and massage.

When discussing treatment options and a plan keep the following tips in mind:

- **Keep it simple** by using common language and avoiding medical jargon to prevent confusion or misunderstandings. Provide your patient with descriptive words for pain that they can relate to (e.g. burning, stabbing, piercing, throbbing, shooting etc.).
- **Build a bridge back to key points** if your patient drifts to other topics.
  - *"That's a really interesting thought. But can we go back to what I was saying earlier before we move on to this topic..."*
- **Ask your patient to repeat back your instructions** so you can confirm a common set of expectations from the proposed treatment plan and assess the patient's comfort level by paying attention to how the information is relayed back to you.
- **Broaden the dialogue** to explore what your patient can also do at home to improve pain (e.g., stretching) – beyond your prescribed treatment plan.



## Establish appointment follow-up process

Make sure to cover the next steps in the agreed-upon treatment plan – tell your patient when you want to hear back about it and how the plan is helping, how he or she can reach you between appointments, and when to schedule the next appointment.

In addition, be prepared to provide referrals for all components of the treatment plan (e.g., physical therapists, massage therapists, acupuncturists).

## Encourage patients to learn about pain management

Recommend that your patient become active with self-education about pain management by providing suggestions for reading materials, websites or other resources that will reinforce the treatment plan and mutual expectations. This will also improve the patient's ability to better communicate to you in future interactions. *Partners Against Pain* ([www.partnersagainstpain.com](http://www.partnersagainstpain.com)) is a useful comprehensive resource for both patients and healthcare professionals.

## Emphasize safe storage of medicines

If medicine is prescribed, remember to review safe medicine storage and disposal techniques. Offer your patient a resource such as [www.safeguardmymeds.org](http://www.safeguardmymeds.org) for more information.

51% say their doctor hasn't discussed

# What Patients Want To Know About long-term treatment Chronic Pain: Results From A National Survey

A survey of healthcare professionals and chronic pain patients revealed that they may not be communicating as effectively as they think they are, and could be settling for *less* when it comes to pain management. There are topics that patients want to discuss at appointments that healthcare professionals aren't bringing up. These insights may be helpful for your next appointments with your chronic pain patients.

- Half of people living with chronic pain (48%) want their healthcare professional to discuss treatment options other than medications. Most patients said their healthcare professional hasn't talked to them about complementary techniques such as yoga, acupuncture, or massage.<sup>6</sup>
- Nearly half of patients (44%) indicated they want to know what steps can be taken on their own to manage pain.<sup>6</sup>
- Over half of patients (51%) said that their healthcare professional hasn't discussed a long-term treatment plan with them.<sup>6</sup>



44%  
want to know how to  
manage their pain

48% of patients surveyed want to  
discuss options other than medication



## Having an Honest Conversation

### about Chronic Pain

Below is a fictional conversation between a healthcare professional and a patient. Note what is done well in this two-way conversation.

**Healthcare professional:** So, Mrs. Smith, you're back for a follow-up appointment. How are you feeling?

**Patient:** Well, I'm still having trouble with the low-back pain. I think the medicine has helped some, but it's still pretty bad.

**Healthcare professional:** OK – first tell me about the pain.

**Patient:** I have been experiencing burning pain in my lower back, mostly in the mornings. When I look back at my pain journal entries, it's been stuck at about a seven on a scale from 1-to-10.

**Healthcare professional:** According to my notes from our last visit, you said it was a nine, so it appears the pain has improved slightly. Is that accurate?

**Patient:** Yes. But I'm still in too much pain to do anything in the morning. I want to manage that pain.

**Healthcare professional:** OK, I understand what you're saying and I want to help you. There are other medicines and approaches that you can try that I'm happy to discuss with you.

**Patient:** OK. A friend also told me that acupuncture can work for pain – what do you think?

**Healthcare professional:** Some people have found success with that, I have an acupuncturist that I can refer you to. This could take some time, so you need to talk to the acupuncturist and find out what kind of schedule of appointments would be best in your circumstances. Your insurance may cover this, so look into that. I also have another medicine that I think may work better for you.

**Patient:** Let me make sure I understand you. I will make an appointment with the acupuncturist and likely have to go at least several times before we find out if it'll work for me, and I'll try a new medicine that may help my pain.

**Healthcare professional:** Yes, that is correct. I will write out the prescription for you with details on how to take the new medication. Make another appointment in six weeks to let me know how the plan is working for you. If you have questions call the office and leave information on how I can get back to you.

**Patient:** Ok, thanks. See you again in a few weeks.



## References

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Since 1993, leading efforts to advance standards of pain care through education and advocacy.

### What is Partners Against Pain®?

In 1993, to raise awareness of the importance of pain management, Purdue Pharma L.P. established Partners Against Pain® – an alliance of patients, caregivers, and healthcare providers dedicated to pain management education and advocacy. Whether you are suffering from chronic pain or caring for a loved one battling this condition, [partnersagainstpain.com](http://partnersagainstpain.com) offers information, support, and practical advice. Our goal is to encourage partnership – to provide the tools and resources that will help patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals better understand and communicate about this condition. It's a complicated issue. Treating pain requires patience, appropriate therapy, medical supervision, and – perhaps most importantly – a common language and understanding. Every day, millions of Americans suffer from chronic, untreated pain. Pain may be inescapable, but proper pain management should be every patient's right.

Learn more at [partnersagainstpain.com](http://partnersagainstpain.com)