

# How to talk to your doctor about arthritis pain

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Chronic pain can be excruciating, debilitating and hard to describe.

Yet the best way to get the right treatment for the exact [pain](#) you're experiencing is to put those symptoms into words, so your doctor can pinpoint a diagnosis and help you find relief.

The Arthritis Foundation created a guide with suggestions for communicating your discomfort. Included are questions ranging from, "What does the pain feel like?" to "How does the pain affect your life?" and specific details to share.

When describing what the pain feels like, be as specific as possible. If you describe it as aching or dull, that may point to [muscle](#) strains or arthritis. A description of shooting, tingling or burning might point to nerve pain as the cause. Sharp or stabbing pain might suggest injuries to a bone, muscle or ligament. Throbbing could be a headache, abscess or gout. Tightness may be a [muscle spasm](#).

Where does it hurt? Is it in one location or does it travel? Is it steady or does it come and go? Try to be precise about location. For example, someone might describe a shoulder pain as deep in the joint or on the muscle surface.

Rate the intensity of your pain on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being pain-free and 10 being unimaginable. This can help a doctor determine the type or dosage of pain medicine you may need.

"Some patients come in the door with an eight on the pain scale, and they're functional. Other patients walk in with a three and they're disabled," said Dr. Thelma Wright, medical director of the Pain Management Center at the University of Maryland Rehabilitation and Orthopedics Institute. "Function is huge."

Keep a journal tracking when you hurt and if it's worse at certain times of day.

"If I notice that a patient has higher pain scores in the morning versus in the evening, I may tailor my medication management to that," Wright said.

Does anything ease your pain? In your journal, make note of what you've tried and what helped or hurt. Options could include heat or ice, rest or over-the-counter pain medicine.

Be aware that it could take a while to find relief. Being able to communicate your pain will help get you closer to a solution.

"It's a trial-and-error process," Wright said. "You might go through several medications before you get the best combination."

**More information:** Johns Hopkins Medicine offers [more information on chronic pain](#).

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