

# Symptoms and pain

## Asking about symptoms

Pain is one of the commonest symptoms.

For headaches, a doctor would expect to establish most of the features below. Similar questions can be used for other forms of pain.

Feature	Typical question
Main Site	Where does it hurt? Show me where it hurts.
Radiation	Does it go anywhere else?
Character	Can you describe the pain?
Precipitating factors	Does anything bring them on?
Time of onset	When do they start?
Time of resolution	When do they stop?
Frequency	How often do you get them?
Aggravating factors	Does anything make them worse? Is there anything else that affects them?
Relieving factors	Does anything make them better?
Associated features	Do you feel anything else wrong when it's there? Have you any other problems related to the pain?
Duration	How long do they last?
Severity	How bad is it?

## Description of pain

Patient's description of pain	Explanation
aching / an ache	a general pain, often in muscles and joints
boring	like a drill
burning	with heat
colicky	an intermittent pain which varies in intensity, comes and goes in waves
crampy/cramp	an involuntary spasmodic muscle contraction
crushing	a feeling of pressure
dull	a background pain, opposite of sharp
gnawing	biting
gripping	a feeling of tightness
scalding	like boiling water
sharp	acute
stabbing	like a knife
stinging	sharp, burning, like an insect sting
throbbing	with a pulse or beat

- 1 Where/it/hurt?
- 2 It/spread/anywhere else?
- 3 You/describe/the pain?
- 4 Anything/bring it on?
- 5 When/it/start?
- 6 When /it/stop?
- 7 How often/you/get it?
- 8 Anything/make/it/worse?
- 9 Anything/make/it/better?
- 10 You/have/any other problems?
- 11 You/feel/anything else/wrong?
- 12 How long/it/last?
- 13 How bad/it/ on a scale from 0 to 10?

- 14 How long/you/had it?
- 15 How long/you/ getting these pains?
- 16 You/had /it before?
- 17 You/take/any medication?

## How Would You Rate Your Pain?

“On a scale from one to ten, how would you rate your pain?” This question feels difficult because pain scales deal with subjective impressions.

Think about the numbers as the following descriptors:

- 1 Minimal or barely noticeable discomfort
- 2 Present, but mild, pain
- 3 Unpleasant, but mostly ignorable, discomfort
- 4 Constant or frequent pain that doesn't interfere with daily activities
- 5 Constant pain that distracts from or prevents some activities
- 6 Constant and distressing pain that affects many activities
- 7 Unmanageable and debilitating pain, which prevents most activities
- 8 Pain so intense it makes listening, talking, and other basic activities difficult
- 9 Pain so severe it makes most activities, including moving, impossible
- 10 Pain that restricts all action, necessitating removal to an emergency care center

Common causes of acute pain include:

broken bones

surgery

dental work

labor and childbirth

cuts

burns

Chronic pain

Pain that lasts for more than six months, even after the original injury has healed, is considered chronic. Without proper management, chronic pain can start to impact your quality of life. As a result, people living with chronic pain may develop symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Some common examples of chronic pain include:

frequent headaches

nerve damage pain

low back pain

arthritis pain

fibromyalgia pain

## Nociceptive pain

Nociceptive pain is the most common type of pain. This type of pain you usually feel when you have any type of injury or inflammation. Nociceptive pain can be either acute or chronic. It can also be further classified as being either visceral or somatic.

## Visceral pain

Visceral pain results from injuries or damage to your internal organs.

Visceral pain is often described as:

pressure

aching

squeezing

cramping

You may also notice other symptoms such as nausea or vomiting, as well as changes in body temperature, heart rate, or blood pressure.

Examples of things that cause visceral pain include:

gallstones

appendicitis

irritable bowel syndrome

## Somatic

Somatic pain results from stimulation of the pain receptors in your tissues, rather than your internal organs.

Somatic pain usually feels like a constant aching or gnawing sensation.

Examples of somatic pain include:

bone fractures

strained muscles

connective tissue diseases, such as osteoporosis

cancer that affects the skin or bones

skin cuts, scrapes, and burns

joint pain, including arthritis pain

## Neuropathic pain

Neuropathic pain results from damage to or dysfunction of your nervous system. You may also feel pain in response to things that aren't usually painful, such as cold air or clothing against your skin.

Neuropathic pain is described as:

burning

freezing

numbness

tingling

shooting

stabbing

electric shocks

Diabetes is a common cause of neuropathic pain. Other sources of nerve injury or dysfunction that can lead to neuropathic pain include:

chronic alcohol consumption

accidents

infections

facial nerve problems, such as Bell's palsy

spinal nerve inflammation or compression

shingles

carpal tunnel syndrome

HIV

central nervous system disorders, such as multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease

radiation

chemotherapy drugs

Pain is a very personal experience that varies from person to person. What feels very painful to one person may only feel like mild pain to another. And other factors, such as your emotional state and overall physical health, can play a big role in how you feel pain.

Describing your pain accurately can make it easier for your doctor to find the cause of your pain and recommend the right treatment. Here are some things your doctor can ask:

Could you tell me/Can you let me know/I'd just like to know

**how long** you've had the pain

**how often** your pain occurs

**what** brought on or triggered your pain

**what activities** or movements make your pain better or worse

**where** you feel the pain

**whether** your pain is localized to one spot or spread out

**if** your pain comes and goes or is constant

**any** medications or treatments you are using

**how long** it lasts

**how severe** it is on a scale of 1 to 10

**Provocation and Palliation:** What were you doing at the onset? What provokes it, what alleviates it?

**Quality/Quantity:** What does the pain feel like and how often? Is it sharp, dull, stabbing, crushing, throbbing, nauseating?

**Region/Radiation:** Where is the pain located? Does it radiate anywhere? If so, where and to what side? Is it equal if both sides are involved?

**Severity Scale:** How much does it hurt on a scale from 1-10?

**Timing:** Does the severity or character of the pain change based on time of day, activity, weather, time of year or position?

**SOCRATES** Site/Onset/Character/Radiation/Associations/Timing/Exacerbating or Alleviating factors/Severity

Be sure to use words that best describes the type of pain you feel.

Here are a few words to consider using:

burning

sharp

dull

intense

aching

cramping

shooting

stabbing

gnawing

gripping

pressure

heavy

tender

prickly

stinging

Study the case notes. Write the questions the doctor asked to obtain the numbered information. Look at Appendix IV on page 144 to help you.

SURNAME <i>Oates</i>		FIRST NAMES <i>Allison</i>	
ADDRESS <i>Acredales, Bridgethorpe</i>			
D.O.B. <i>30/4/79</i>		SEX <i>F</i>	MARITAL STATUS <i>married<sup>(1)</sup></i>
OCCUPATION <i>bank clerk<sup>(2)</sup></i>			
<b>Presenting complaint</b> <i>c/o severe headache, boring in nature<sup>(3)</sup>, mainly in and around R eye<sup>(4)</sup>. Can radiate to forehead<sup>(5)</sup>. Comes on at any time<sup>(6)</sup> and can vary in duration 1-2hrs<sup>(7)</sup>. No precipitating<sup>(8)</sup> or relieving<sup>(9)</sup> factors. Has noticed haloes around lights with some blurry vision in R eye and vomiting<sup>(10)</sup>.</i>			

Read the continuation of the case notes for the patient in C opposite. Write the doctor's questions. Look at Appendix IV on page 144 to help you.

PMH similar headaches 10 yrs, coming every 3 mths. Often premenstrual. Aggravated by eating chocolate; relieved by lying in dark room. Can have visual aura, blurred vision, nausea + s.t.s vomiting.

Doctor: Can you tell me what the problem is?

Patient: I've got a terrible headache.

Doctor: (1) ..... ?

Patient: Just here.

Doctor: (2) ..... ?

Patient: Well, it's really bad. And it throbs.

Doctor: Have you had anything like this before?

Patient: Yes, about every three months. I've had them for the last ten years or so.

Doctor: (3) ..... ?

Patient: Usually one or two days. This one started yesterday morning.

Doctor: (4) ..... ?

Patient: They usually start just before my period. Sometimes if I eat chocolate. I'm not sure.

Doctor: (5) ..... ?

Patient: If I lie down in a dark room it helps. Light makes them worse.

Doctor: (6) ..... ?

Patient: If I move my head, it gets more painful.

Doctor: Apart from the headache, (7) ..... ?

Patient: Yes, my eye feels strange. Sometimes I can't see clearly, things get blurred. I feel sick and sometimes I am sick.

## Bee sting script

D: Hi Come on in. How are you?

P: I'm good, and you?

D: Fine. I've got X with me, she's just started with us.  
Take a seat just there. Right, how are things?

P: Well, I got a bee sting on Saturday and it didn't really hurt at the time.  
But yesterday and today it's swollen up and it's so sore.  
I went to the pharmacy and I've been putting Antiflamm on it,  
but it's so sore and itchy. He thought it might be infected.  
It's a bit hot and throbbing.

D: Let me just have a look. I think antihistamines are the right  
thing to do and it would be really good if you could elevate  
it, so tie it up around your shoulder. I don't think it's infected.

P: Even at night I've been waking up because I've been lying  
on it, and it's so hot and sore..

aching/an ache	<i>sordo</i>
piercing /boring	<i>penetrante</i>
burning	<i>quemante</i>
colicky	<i>como cólicos</i>
crampy/cramps	<i>calambres</i>
crushing	<i>aplastante</i>
dull	<i>sordo/leve</i>
gnawing	<i>lacerante</i>
gripping	<i>insistente/constante</i>
scalding	<i>ardiente</i>
sharp	<i>agudo</i>
stabbing	<i>punzante</i>
stinging	<i>que pica/quema</i>
throbbing	<i>palpitante</i>
tight	<i>apretado</i>
excruciating	<i>insoportable</i>
thunderclap	<i>como un trueno</i>
shooting	<i>fulgurante</i>
spasmodic	<i>espasmódico</i>

## Describing pain

Work in pairs. Which descriptions 1–10 do you associate with the conditions a–j? In some cases, there may be more than one answer.

- |    |                                     |   |                              |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 1  | piercing / boring                   | a | sciatica                     |
| 2  | extremely severe / intense          | b | ureteric colic               |
| 3  | aching                              | c | acute pancreatitis           |
| 4  | scalding / burning                  | d | appendicitis                 |
| 5  | like a tight band<br>around my head | e | degenerative arthritis       |
| 6  | dull / persistent / vague           | f | cluster headache             |
| 7  | excruciating / thunderclap          | g | cystitis                     |
| 8  | shooting                            | h | tension headache             |
| 9  | spasmodic                           | i | sub-arachnoid<br>haemorrhage |
| 10 | crushing / gripping                 | j | angina pectoris              |

sometimes I am sick.



Complete the sentences. Look at Appendix IV on page 144 to help you.

- 1 Gastric ulcers are associated with a ..... , ..... pain.
- 2 Cystitis causes ..... , ..... pain on passing urine.
- 3 Patients with a peptic ulcer may say they have a ..... , ..... pain.
- 4 Recurrent abdominal pain (RAP) may be described as ..... or .....
- 5 Migraine is often described as a ..... pain.
- 6 People with osteoarthritis often complain of a deep ..... centred in the joint.
- 7 Kidney stone pain is sudden, severe and .....
- 8 Angina is usually described as a crushing or heavy or ..... pain.

Piercing/boring	acute pancreatitis
Severe/intense	cluster headache
Aching	degenerative arthritis
Scalding/burning	cystitis
Like a tight band	tension headache
Dull/persistent	appendicitis
Excruciating	sub-arachnoid haemorage
Shooting	sciatica
Spasmodic	ureteric colic
Crushing/gripping	angina pectoris

Gastric ulcers	gnawing, burning
Cystitis	stinging/scalding
Peptic ulcer	sharp, burning
RAP	crampy, colicky
Migraine	throbbing
Osteoarthritis	ache in joints
Kidney stones	sharp
Angina	gripping

It's normal to experience side effects after the vaccine. It shows the vaccine is teaching your body's immune system how to protect itself from the disease, however not everyone gets them.

Most of these are mild and short term. They may include:

tenderness, swelling and/or redness at the injection site

headache or muscle ache

joint pain

chills

nausea or vomiting

feeling tired

fever (temperature above 37.8°C).

These common side effects are much less serious than developing coronavirus or complications associated with coronavirus and they usually go away within a few days.

If you feel uncomfortable, take paracetamol. Make sure you take paracetamol as directed on the label or leaflet.

Another possible side effect is swollen glands in the armpit or neck, on the same side as the arm where you had the vaccine.

This can last for around 10 days, but if it lasts longer see your doctor.

If you are due for breast screening (a mammogram) then you should mention that you have had the vaccine when you attend.

If you're worried about your symptoms, phone NHS 24's 111 service.

<b>Adjective</b>	<b>noun</b>	<b>verb</b>
tender	tenderness	hurt
sore	soreness	hurt
painful	pain	hurt
achy/aching	ache	ache
swollen	swelling	swell



- 2** Work in pairs. Decide how you would differentiate between the pain in b–e in 1. Give reasons for your answer.
- 3** For each description, write M (mild), S (severe), or V (very severe). Then say which condition a–j in 1 each patient below is possibly describing.
  - 1 \_\_\_\_\_ I get this vague headache sometimes during the week.
  - 2 \_\_\_\_\_ The headache is excruciating.  
I can't bear to look at the light.
  - 3 \_\_\_\_\_ The pain in my stomach is so bad it makes me double up.
  - 4 \_\_\_\_\_ I get this sharp pain when you press my side here on the right and then let go.
  - 5 \_\_\_\_\_ All my joints hurt. I am wracked with pain.
- 4** You can ask a patient to describe pain on a scale of 1 to 10. What other ways can you ask a patient to assess the severity of pain?

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## Dr Gillian Henderson

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My name is Dr Henderson. I'm a cardiologist at a London hospital. The highly trained team of which I am part deals with the diagnosis, investigation, and treatment of patients with all forms of heart disease, including cardiac transplantation and some sorts of vascular disease.

None of our work would be possible without the support of other people in the hospital team – the triage nurses, the receptionists, and so on. Their work is vital to the smooth running of the department. When patients arrive for the first time, personal information is taken: name, address, telephone numbers, next of kin for contact in case of emergency, and other information such as their GP's name and address, their NHS number, and their unique hospital number.

We deal with a large catchment area and also deal with referrals from outside the area, tourists, visitors to A&E, private patients, and so on, so the potential for confusion is great unless the data that are taken are accurate and the systems secure.

At various stages of patients' contact with the hospital, information is checked to make sure it is correct and that the patients can confirm their identity. For example, on arrival at a clinic patients might be asked their GP's name or part of their telephone number, for example the last three numbers.

Then during the consultation a nurse or a doctor might also ask their date of birth. All this is for the benefit of the patient to ensure the hospital team does not make mistakes and people do not use patients' details fraudulently.

We can then turn to dealing with the patients' treatment in safety.

