

How can you describe your pain to a healthcare provider?

Pain is something we will all experience. Usually, pain is a biological defence mechanism to let us know that something might be wrong or that we should stop doing something that causes the pain. Sometimes though, the system goes wrong and we experience pain that is not related to further damage.

Pain is a personal, unique, and subjective experience. What might be mildly irritating and short lived for one person may be experienced by someone else as debilitating, excruciating, and long lasting. We often hear this referred to as 'pain tolerance'.

This leaflet has been produced to provide some ideas that might help you understand what it is you are feeling and how to describe those feelings clearly so somebody else is able to get a sense of what you are experiencing. This leaflet does not claim to provide an exhaustive list of words or phrases to use, and you may well have your own way of describing your pain.

How to describe your pain to a healthcare provider

A further series of six information leaflets from Blesma, The Limbless Veterans is available. All these leaflets can be downloaded from www.blesma.org/leaflets

If you prefer, you can receive hard copies by calling **020 8590 1124** or by emailing info@blesma.org

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“It is important, especially with long-term chronic pain, that the impact of the pain on your life is assessed”



The four aspects of your pain

When talking about pain to a healthcare provider, they may ask you about four aspects of your pain:

SITE SEVERITY CHARACTER IMPACT

SITE

The site of the pain is important and yet is not always clearly defined. An amputee will very often be assumed to have Phantom Limb Pain even if the pain is actually stump pain or from a completely different site altogether. Make sure you clearly describe where you feel the pain.

Other important details are whether the pain moves or is always in one place, as well as what brings it on and what reduces it.

SEVERITY

There are many ways to determine how severe someone's pain is but they all need questions to be asked of the patient. Regardless of the scale used, any pain in the lower third of a scale is thought to be mild and often does not need a medical treatment. However, pain in the middle and upper thirds of a scale indicates a significant problem that needs support. The important point is that you are asked about your pain, and that the answer you give is always correct. Sometimes, pain is worse at certain times or after particular activities, and these often need to be determined.



CHARACTER

Being able to describe the character of the pain can give clues as to the mechanism behind the pain; i.e. what is causing it. This is important as some pain types respond to certain treatments better than others. Typical words are:

- Aching
- Cramping
- Fearful
- Gnawing
- Heavy
- Hot / burning
- Punishing / cruel
- Sharp
- Shooting
- Sickening
- Splitting
- Stabbing
- Tender
- Throbbing
- Tiring / exhausting

The most common pain types are:

- Sharp, stabbing pain
- Extreme heat or burning sensation
- Extreme cold
- Throbbing, swollen, inflamed tissue
- Sensitivity to contact / touch
- Itching
- Numbness, tingling, pins and needles



Using examples of commonly known painful scenarios may also be helpful to give a sense of your pain in comparison to a generally understood threshold. For example:

- It feels like a bee sting, but 10 times worse.
- It's like the worst toothache.
- It feels like I've been burnt, but under my skin.

IMPACT

It is important, especially with long-term chronic pain, that the impact of the pain on your life is assessed. There are several questionnaires available that can provide different views of the pain and its impact on you. Some are quite short, whilst some are not. Even if not directly asked, try to get the message of how the pain interferes with your life across to the healthcare provider.

In summary, pain can be both exhausting and disruptive to your everyday life. It is also subjective. Because we all experience pain differently, sometimes it's difficult to know how to explain the degree and type of pain to your doctor when you need help.

The better you can describe that pain, though, the quicker and more successful s/he will be in matching you with a treatment that will help you feel better.

Where to get help and support

In the first instance, you should consult with your GP. You can also find information on pain via the internet, and a good place to start is NHS Choices or the NHS website. Just search for 'NHS pain management' or similar. If you are a military veteran you may be entitled to access the Veterans' Pain Clinic.

What is the Veterans' Pain Clinic?

The Veterans' Pain Clinic offers veterans a 45-minute appointment with Dr Dominic Aldington, a specialist in Pain Medicine who served in both the Regular and the Territorial Armies, and was formerly head of the Pain Service at Headley Court. As a veteran himself, Dr Aldington provides a unique insight into pain and the veteran, and offers medication review, advice and guidance, as well as liaising directly with the veteran's GP.

Make an enquiry

To access the Veterans' Pain Clinic, you can be referred by your GP, your consultant, a veterans' charity or a regimental association. You can also self-refer by calling **020 7467 4370**.

For further information, please contact your Blesma Support Officer (www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos) or Brian Chenier, Blesma Support Officer (Prosthetics) on 020 8548 7080 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org