Understanding Pain as the Fifth Vital Sign

Pam Stone, RN, BSN
Austin Community College
Continuing Education
Health Professions Institute
Course Objectives

- Define pain & discuss types of pain
- Assess pain based on patient self report
- Discuss impact of pain on healing process
Definitions

• Pain is an unpleasant, subjective sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage.

*International Association for the Study of Pain*

• Pain is a subjective response to both physical and psychological stressors.
Margo McCaffery states.................
“Pain is whatever the experiencing person says it is, existing whenever he says it does.”

Basic scientific definition: Pain is a sensation caused by some noxious stimuli
Pathophysiology of Pain

• Pain can be divided into 2 components:
  • PHYSICAL pain – Peripheral and Central Nervous System perception of pain
  • EMOTIONAL pain – interconnectedness of thoughts, feelings and beliefs concerning pain perception
Types of Pain

• Nociceptive Pain – occurs from real or impending tissue damage; somatic or visceral

• Neuropathic or Neurogenic Pain – arises from damaged or injured nervous tissue or distorted processing of pain: central, peripheral, crushing injury, infection, inflammation or scarring
Types of Pain cont.

- Mechanical Pain – excess stretching or pressure to tissue; swelling, abdominal or bladder distention
- Thermal Pain – either heat or cold; inflammation or loss of superficial layers of the epidermis
- Electrical - an electrical burn
Pain Assessment

• Pain is considered the fifth vital sign along with pulse, respiration, blood pressure and temperature.
• Incomplete &/or inconsistent assessment may lead to inadequate pain management.
• Inadequate pain management may interfere with the healing process.
Myths & Misconceptions

• Regular use of analgesics, especially narcotics, leads to addiction
• Drug abusers overreact to pain
• Minor illnesses and injuries are less painful than severe ones
• Healthcare workers are the expert in interpreting the patient’s pain, not the patient
PQRST Assessment Tool

- **P** - Precipitating/provoking factors; what causes pain
- **Q** – Quality; describe the pain
- **R** - Region/Radiation; where is the pain
- **S** – Severity; rate intensity of the pain
- **T** – Timing; onset, duration

Inquire about aggravating and relieving factors
Inquire regarding treatment
Pain Scales

- Visual analog scale – Scale of 0-10 on a line, 0 being no pain to 10 being worse pain
- Wong-Baker FACES Pain Rating Scale – used with children and patients who have verbal communication difficulties.
- Pain scales are valuable assessment, intervention and evaluation tools to be used throughout care.
Special Needs Groups

• Infants and children
• Older adults
• Patients with history of substance abuse
• Ethnicity – genetics and culture
Acute Pain vs. Chronic Pain

• Acute pain is usually of short duration, lasts no longer than 6 months.
• Acute pain occurs when tissue injury or potential injury initiates nociceptors
• Examples: surgery, infection, trauma, inflammation
Acute vs. Chronic Pain cont.

- Chronic Pain is usually of long duration, persists for 6 months or longer
- Terminal pain
- Chronic benign pain such as arthritis
- Chronic pain syndrome – back pain, headache
- Psychogenic pain
- Malignant, non-malignant or combined
- May have acute pain with chronic pain
The 5th Vital Sign

• Pain is usually unwelcome and uncomfortable
• Pain is also protective – warning of potentially health-threatening conditions
• Pain is the most common reason for seeking healthcare
• The symptom most associated with describing oneself as ill is pain
• Pain affects the whole body
Summary

• It is important to remember every person deserves a thorough pain assessment
• Pain is what the patient says it is (subjective)
• Tools should be utilized to objectively assess, intervene and evaluate outcomes
• Healthcare workers must be familiar with organizational standards regarding pain
Analyze how you feel about pain

• Know the subjective and the objective
• Educate yourself, your patients and their support groups
• Pain is continually untreated, undertreated and misdiagnosed
• Don’t let that happen to your patients or to yourself.
Resources and Websites

American Chronic Pain Association – www.theacpa.org

• American Pain Foundation – www.painfoundation.org

• American Pain Society – www.ampainsoc.org

• American Society of Pain Management Nursing - www.aspmn.org
Resources and Websites cont.

- Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations – www.jcaho.org
- National Pain Foundation – www.painconnection.org