Practical nondrug strategies to offer patients in pain

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More than 1 in 10 Americans live with chronic pain. Pharmacists can offer patients a number of nonpharmacologic strategies for reducing pain.

“These recommendations are for patients with chronic pain who’ve been diagnosed, are under a physician’s care, and there’s no suspicion of acute processes going on,” said Chris Herndon, PharmD, associate professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville School of Pharmacy.

“Sixty percent of patients we surveyed are willing to discuss treatment with pharmacists, but they don’t think pharmacists have time,” Herndon said.

Orthotics, assistive devices
Community pharmacists can help patients choose from the braces and canes available in the pharmacy. “A lot of pain is from overuse and overload,” Herndon said. “Taking some of that load off can really go a long way.”

Exercise
Patients often avoid any activity when they are in pain. That’s the worst thing they can do, said Jeffrey Fudin, PharmD, a clinical pharmacist at Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany, NY. “Walking is great for back pain,” he said. “Because it strengthens the muscle on each side of the spine, which takes some of the pressure off the vertebrae.”

For patients who can’t walk, Fudin recommends pool walking or riding a stationary bike. McKenzie exercises—standard protocol among many physical therapists and widely available online—and tai chi also bring benefits. The latter has proven beneficial for different types of pain in clinical trials.

“Exercise doesn’t need to be long,” said Herndon. “Patients just need to be moving.”

Healthy diet
Exercise also helps take off extra weight. So does diet. And losing weight can help reduce pain. “A lot of patients with lower-extremity osteoarthritis, low back pain, or lumbar spinal pain would benefit from losing weight,” said Herndon. “Every little bit reduces the amount of stress on the lower joints.”

But weight isn’t the only reason to eat a healthy diet. People living with pain should eat a low-fat, protein-rich, and fiber-rich diet. Greasy, fatty, and spicy foods might exacerbate some pain, said Fudin. Excessive sugar contributes to diabetic neuropathy. Protein, on the other hand, helps build muscle, which may mitigate some pain.

Magnesium and vitamin D can reduce perception of chronic pain, and some B vitamins fuel the neurotransmitters that put the brakes on pain, according to Herndon. “Diet is a big deal,” he said. “Pharmacists aren’t dietitians, but we know our way around this stuff. It’s very reasonable to advise patients in this area.”

Smoking cessation
Analgesics can only do so much for patients who smoke. “A lot of data show that any kind of smoking increases bone pain, particularly back pain,” said Fudin. While patients know the other risks of smoking all too well, they may not know that it can exacerbate pain.

Distraction
Research shows that when a person is distracted—for example, by a conversation or an activity—perception of pain is reduced. “The most important thing is having something that keeps them from sitting and thinking about their pain all day,” Herndon said.

Relaxation, meditation, yoga, or taking up a hobby could help in this area. “If patients can’t do this on their own, they should seek out a counselor, because counselors can help with this,” said Fudin.

Support
Support groups, or simply seeking out others with the same concerns, can be a great comfort. They may also provide social distraction. “Join a support group or start one,” Herndon said. “Somebody out there has the same pain that you’re experiencing.”

Sonya Collins, MA, MFA, contributing writer

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Realistic expectations
Many people with chronic pain aim to be pain-free. But after years of pain, this is probably not a realistic expectation. Not meeting that expectation, day in and day out, can make the pain unbearable. Learning about chronic pain can help patients set realistic expectations and understand that they can continue with their lives.

“Becoming educated about what’s going on with your pain syndrome has therapeutic benefits in and of itself,” Herndon said. He refers patients to the American Chronic Pain Association, an online educational resource.