

Non-Opioid Pain Medications

What is happening

Pain is common in serious illness and can affect:

- Comfort
- Sleep
- Activity
- Quality of life

Non-opioid pain medications are often helpful for **mild to moderate pain** and may also be used together with opioid medications.

Why these medications are used

These medications help to:

- Reduce pain
- Improve comfort and movement
- Improve sleep and daily functioning

Unlike many opioid medications, these medications usually cause **less drowsiness**.

What you may see

Pain may appear as:

- Facial grimacing
- Guarding or protecting an area
- Difficulty moving
- Trouble sleeping
- Irritability or restlessness

Common medications

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- NSAIDs:
 - Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)
 - Naproxen (Aleve)
- Gabapentin (Neurontin)

These medications work in different ways and are often used together with other pain treatments.

How to give these medications

- Most are taken **by mouth**
- Give with fluids if the patient is able to swallow safely
- NSAIDs are best taken:
 - With food
 - Or after meals

These medications should be given when pain is present and should not be skipped simply because the pain seems “not too bad.”

Special considerations

Acetaminophen (Tylenol)

- Some opioid medications (such as Vicodin or Norco) also contain acetaminophen
- Too much acetaminophen can harm the liver
- Follow guidance from the hospice team regarding safe total amounts

NSAIDs (Ibuprofen, Naproxen)

These medications may not be safe for everyone.

Use caution and discuss with the hospice team if the patient has:

- Kidney problems
- Stomach ulcers
- History of bleeding

Gabapentin (Neurontin)

- Often used for **nerve pain (neuropathic pain)**
- Frequently used together with other pain medications

When it should work

- Many non-opioid pain medications begin working within **about 30 minutes**

Possible side effects

Acetaminophen

- Usually very well tolerated when used correctly

NSAIDs

- Upset stomach
- Increased risk of bleeding
- Kidney problems

Gabapentin

- Drowsiness
- Fatigue
- Constipation

When to call hospice

- Pain is not controlled
- Nausea or vomiting develops
- Stomach pain or cramping occurs
- Bleeding is seen or suspected
- Excessive drowsiness or weakness develops
- You are unsure which medication to give or whether medications can be combined