

Causes and types of pain

Pain can be caused by many different things. Each person's experience of pain is different and can be the result of more than one cause. Some people may have multiple sites of pain, and each may be caused by different things.

Some of the most common causes of pain for older people include:

- Joint problems (e.g. osteoarthritis)
- Back problems
- Nerve pain
- Constipation
- Positioning
- Immobility
- Falls
- Pressure sores
- Strokes
- Heart/chest pain (e.g. angina)
- Poor circulation
- Pain due to disease (e.g. cancer)

The **type of pain** can be categorised according to duration or persistence of pain, and by the mechanisms by which the experience of pain is created. Knowing the type of pain helps determine the best course of action for treatment.

Duration or persistence of pain

Acute pain: this is short-term pain that stops when the harmful event is over, the person has recovered from disease, or an injury has healed.

Recurrent pain: when acute pain comes and goes (e.g. intermittent flares, such as in rheumatoid arthritis).

Chronic pain: this is persistent pain that does not go away after the acute episode is over, or is present for 3+ months.

Mechanism of pain

Neuropathic pain: related to damage to the nervous system (e.g. lesion or disease of the nervous system). Often less responsive to common analgesics.

Nociceptive pain: caused by a tissue injury (e.g. a cut or sprain)

- **Visceral:** related to organs (e.g. liver, heart, gut, etc.) and is generally poorly localised
- **Somatic:** related to pain stimuli in the skin, muscles or bones, and is generally well-localised. Can be deep or superficial.

Radicular pain: occurs when the spinal nerve gets compressed or inflamed. Pain radiates from the back and hip into one or both legs. A common form is sciatica.

Incident or breakthrough pain: pain that is not well-controlled and needs additional treatment for the person to be comfortable.
