

Common Pain Terms and Definitions

Below is a list of definitions of medical terms often used in pain management clinics.

Pain - "An unpleasant 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 always subjective with each individual learning about the application of the word through experiences related to injury in early life.

Acute Pain is the normal, predicted physiological response to an adverse chemical, thermal, or mechanical stimulus associated with surgery, trauma, and acute illness. It is generally time-limited and is responsive to Opioid therapy, among other therapies.

Chronic Pain is a pain state which is persistent and in which the cause of the pain cannot always be removed or is difficult to treat. Chronic Pain may be associated with a long term incurable or intractable medical condition or disease.

Hyperaesthesia (opposite = Hypoaesthesia) where a non-painful stimulus is perceived to be stronger than normal (weaker than normal) but is not painful e.g. a light touch becomes a stronger (weaker) touch but is not painful.

Hyperalgesia (opposite = hypoalgesia) where a painful stimulus is perceived to be more painful than normal (less painful than normal) e.g. a pin prick is felt as a stronger (weaker) pinprick than normal.

Paraesthesia is an abnormal sensation which is not perceived as painful e.g. gently knocking your funny bone at the elbow causes non-painful tingling in your little finger.

Dysaesthesia is an abnormal sensation which is perceived as unpleasant or painful e.g. strongly knocking your funny bone at the elbow causing painful unpleasant tingling and pain in the little finger.

Allodynia (Greek - other pain) is pain produced by a stimulus which would not normally cause pain e.g. lightly stroking the skin causing vibrational allodynia, putting your hands in luke warm water causing thermal allodynia.

Tolerance is a physiologic state resulting from regular use of a drug in which an increased dosage is needed over time to produce the same effect, or a reduced effect is observed with a constant dose.

Analgesic Tolerance is the need to increase the dose of opioid (pain killer or reliever) to achieve the same level of analgesia. Analgesic Tolerance may or may not be evident during opioid treatment and does not equate with addiction.

Physical Dependence on a controlled substance is a physiologic state of neuro-addiction which is characterized by the emergence of a withdrawal syndrome if drug use is stopped or decreased abruptly, or if an antagonist is administered. Physical Dependence is an expected result of Opioid use. Physical Dependence, by itself, does not equate with addiction.

Addiction is a neurobehavioral syndrome with genetic and environmental influences that results in psychological dependence on the use of substances for their psychic effects and is characterized by compulsive use despite harm. Addiction may also be referred to by terms such as "drug dependence" and "psychological dependence". Physical dependence and tolerance are normal physiological consequences of extended Opioid therapy for Pain and should not be considered addiction.

Pseudo Addiction is a pattern of drug seeking behaviour of pain patients who are receiving inadequate pain management that can be mistaken for addiction.

Substance Abuse is the use of any substance(s) for non-therapeutic purposes or use of medication for purposes other than those for which it is prescribed.