

## Understanding Symptom Management

# Myths and Facts about Pain Medication

All members of the hospice team will frequently ask about your loved one's comfort and whether they are experiencing any pain. It is important to always report any pain or symptoms that are new to right away so the nurse can follow up.

There are many myths when it comes to understanding symptom management and the use of pain medication. Here we answer some of the most common myths with facts about pain medication.

**MYTH:** Pain medicine should be saved and used only when pain is severe.

**FACT:** Pain medication should be given on a regular basis so there is a stable amount of medicine in the body to keep the pain away. By taking medication before the pain becomes unbearable, the patient can get better relief with lower doses and fewer side effects.

**MYTH:** An individual will develop a tolerance to his/her medication and will have to keep taking more and more until he/she is immune to it and it doesn't work anymore.

**FACT:** Tolerance to opioid drugs occurs but is seldom a clinical problem. Tolerance means that taking the drug changes the body in such a way that the drug loses its effect over time. Most patients' doses are gradually increased until pain relief is obtained, then they stabilize at this dose for a period of time. If doses need to be increased because pain returns, it is more commonly due to disease factors.

**MYTH:** If an individual takes narcotic medications, he/she will become addicted.

**FACT:** Addiction is characterized by the compulsive use of drugs for their psychological effects. It is rare for patients with pain who have no history of substance abuse to become addicted to pain medication.

**MYTH:** If an individual no longer needs the medication, he/she will go through severe withdrawal when trying to stop it.

**FACT:** Withdrawal is a physical phenomenon that means the body has adapted to the drug in such a way a "rebound" occurs when the drug is suddenly stopped. All people who take opioids for a period of time can have this withdrawal syndrome if the drug is stopped or suddenly lowered. This can be prevented by slowly tapering use of a drug over time. Possibly having withdrawal is not the same as being addicted and is usually no problem at all.

**MYTH:** Pain is only a physical issue.

**FACT:** Pain may generate from spiritual or emotional concerns. Please speak with your chaplain or social worker.