

# Stages of Pain Management: Treatment Continuum for Chronic Pain

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According to the National Center for Health Statistics, over 76.5 million Americans suffer from chronic pain.<sup>1</sup> Those affected by chronic pain have many therapeutic options to discuss with physicians to try to relieve their pain. But what is the best approach? When should one treatment be tried over another? This article presents a tiered, industry-accepted approach to managing pain.

### A Tiered Approach

Physicians generally treat chronic pain patients using an algorithmic care paradigm known as the pain treatment continuum. According to the pain treatment continuum, physicians start with the least expensive and least invasive treatments.

The continuum of care for patients suffering from chronic pain begins with conservative non-invasive treatments (top) and progresses toward destructive invasive ones.



If the patient doesn't respond well to the therapy or has become unresponsive to it over time, physicians will prescribe a more expensive or invasive option on progressing tiers of the continuum until a therapy or combination of therapies works.<sup>2</sup> Treatment options for patients fall under two main categories: conservative therapies and interventional therapies.

### Conservative Therapies

Conservative therapies are predominantly non-invasive treatments and appear on the lower tiers of the pain treatment continuum. Conservative treatments range from minimally intensive options

such as exercise programs, physical and psychological therapies, over-the-counter medications, and transcutaneous electrical stimulation (TENS) to moderately intensive options such as nerve block procedures and opioid medications.

### Interventional Therapies

As a patient's pain resists conservative treatments or as patients become refractory to them, interventional procedures may be able to relieve the pain. Interventional therapies include surgery, neurostimulation, an intrathecal pump, and neuroablation. Of the aforementioned options, surgery and neuroablation are irreversible procedures.

### The Best Medical Management

Various pain etiologies and each patient's unique physiology and psychological disposition toward pain complicate how physicians implement the best care. As such, pain patients may benefit by consulting a pain management physician, who specializes in diagnosing and treating pain conditions like chronic pain. Regardless of when a treatment is used, the most important factor is to provide patients the best medical management of their pain.

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Health Statistics. Health, United States, 2006 With Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans. Hyattsville, Md.:68-71. Cited by: Pain Facts and Figures page. American Pain Foundation website. Available at: <http://www.painfoundation.org/page.asp?file=Newsroom/PainFacts.htm>. Accessed September 25, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Krames E. Spinal cord stimulation: indications, mechanism of action, and efficacy. *Curr Rev Pain.* 1999;3(6):419-426.



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