

key points

SELECTED BY

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Around 50 to 80% of older people living in the

community experience some form of pain, often because of chronic, degenerative conditions. Despite this, the awareness and management of pain in older people remains inadequate.

Pain assessment in older patients can be challenging.

There is a high prevalence of cognitive impairment, with associated decline in verbal communication skills, and false assumptions that pain is an inevitable consequence of growing old and that people with cognitive impairment have a higher pain threshold. A high level of stoicism among older people often means that they suffer in silence.

It is essential that all healthcare providers develop the

skills necessary to assess pain accurately and judiciously apply appropriate drug and non-drug treatment strategies.

Pain in patients with mild to moderate cognitive

impairment can be assessed using simple questions and screening tools. GPs should note the presence of pain behaviour during activity such as walking or transfers.

Patients with severe dementia may have altered

affective responses to pain causing them to communicate pain in ways that are challenging to carers and less easily understood. Subtle changes in behaviour patterns should raise the suspicion of pain and lead to a systematic evaluation of possible causes.

The use of non-drug therapies, including physiotherapy,

occupational therapy, massage therapy and psychological therapy, should be considered. There is strong evidence that regular participation in physical activities reduces pain and enhances the functional capacity of older patients with persistent pain.

Stepwise treatment progression is recommended.

This should progress from non-opioid analgesics such as paracetamol, to anti-inflammatory drugs, to neurotransmitter-modulating and membrane-stabilising drugs and opioids, while balancing the medical risks and benefits.

Although drug regimens should be as simple as

possible, a combination of two or more therapeutic agents may afford better pain relief with less toxicity than higher doses of a single agent.