

The Role of Pain Classification Systems in Pain Management

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KEYWORDS

- Pain • Classification • Etiologic • Pathophysiological • Duration • Intensity
- Pain management • Pain assessment

KEY POINTS

- Pain classification systems are key evidenced-based methods of documentation that assist with formulating subjective and objective assessment data in pain management.
- Incorporating a holistic approach to pain management is essential to achieve desired patient outcomes.
- Health care professionals must be proactive and recognize potential negative consequences and barriers in pain management, including addiction, misuse, psychological aspects, genetic factors, and socioeconomic considerations.

INTRODUCTION

The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defines pain as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage.”^{1–3} Pain is a universal experience and continues to be the predominant reason for health care encounters.⁴ The American Academy of Pain Medicine reports that pain touches more Americans than the chronic diseases of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease combined.⁵ According to the Joint Commission International, Margo McCaffrey’s definition of pain is the gold standard for patient treatment in clinical practice. McCaffrey defines pain as “whatever the experiencing person says it is, existing whenever he or she says it does.”^{1,3}

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RELEVANCE TO CLINICAL PRACTICE

Health care professionals strive to achieve effective pain management in clinical practice. Pain management can be a dynamically complex task with the primary goal of achieving satisfactory results for the patient's quality of life. Health care professionals are equipped with evidence-based practices and resources to assist in making sound clinical judgment. To start the pain assessment process, recognizing and understanding the value of pain classification systems in the clinical decision-making process is vital to providing appropriate care for each patient experiencing pain.

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

Key classification systems synthesized in clinical practice include anatomic, etiologic, intensity, duration, and pathophysiological classifications. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), anatomic, etiologic, duration, and pathophysiological are the most commonly used classification systems.² A comprehensive approach is the optimal plan of action in effective pain management. Pain classification systems are 1-dimensional and the need to apply the systems using a multimodal approach is evident.⁶

Anatomic

The Anatomic Pain classification system describes the specific region or area of the body that is perceived to be experiencing pain. When applicable, it is often the first classification system used to identify the body location experiencing pain. The "Where is Your Pain" diagram is a useful tool to assist with assessment and documentation of pain.⁷

Etiologic

The Etiologic Pain classification system describes the causative factor of pain. Etiologic classification of pain can be subdivided into malignant versus nonmalignant to reference cancerous versus noncancerous causes of pain.^{2,6} Etiologic pain factors include acute injury or underlying disease and/or condition. The underlying disease or condition can be acute or chronic in nature. It may be due to the treatment of the underlying disease or condition, including surgical interventions.³

Intensity

The Pain Intensity classification system can be measured through visual, numerical, rating, and/or descriptor scales.⁷ The National Institute of Pain Control recognizes the Wong-Baker Faces Pain Scale, the 0 to 10 Numeric Pain Rating Scale, the Verbal Pain Intensity Scale, the Neuropathic Pain Scale, the Descriptor Differential Scale, and the Visual Analog Scale (Fig. 1).⁷

In *Pain Management Nursing Scope and Standards of Practice*, 2nd edition, the American Nurses Association (ANA) provides resources for pain assessment using intensity scales. The adult recommendations include the following:

For adolescents and adults

- Numeric Pain Rating Scale
- Verbal Descriptor Pain Scale
- FACES Pain Scale, revised
- Wong-Baker FACES Pain Rating Scale
- Iowa Pain Scale
- Functional Pain Scale

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