



## PAIN ASSESSMENT IN INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE UNABLE TO REPORT PAIN

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### Guiding Principles for Assessment of Pain

Pain is a personal experience and there is no test to measure it. The existence and intensity of a person's pain is whatever the person experiencing the pain says it is. **Self-report is the best way to identify if a person is in pain.** However, some people are unable to communicate their pain verbally, by writing or by other means. They still could be in pain and there are other ways to observe if they are experiencing pain.

### Causes of Pain

Assessing the presence and severity of pain is important to reduce the person's discomfort and to see if there is of another health condition that requires attention.

An individual's pain may be caused by a serious and life-threatening condition, wound or trauma or a less severe condition that may lead to a more serious outcome. For example, a toothache may indicate an oral infection; a sore throat may be the first sign of a respiratory infection and pain in the joints may indicate the presence of osteoarthritis. In these and other cases, it is important to identify the pain to reduce the person's discomfort but also to identify and treat the condition that is causing the pain.

### Assessing Pain in Persons Who Cannot Communicate

How do you assess the pain of those who are unable to speak for themselves? That is the challenge faced by many families and staff who provide supports to individuals with an intellectual or developmental disability. There are, however, several things that families and staff can do help identify if a person is experiencing pain. Start by asking the person. Some people with limited communication skills can respond with a yes or no or they can nod, or in some other way communicate that they are in pain.

**Look for causes of pain.** A health care provider can tell the family/staff if a recent surgery, physical trauma, burn, wound or other condition and medical procedures typically causes pain.

Look for *behaviors that are not typical* of the individual, which may indicate pain.

For example, **crying, grimacing, screaming when touched, moaning, whining or whimpering** may indicate the presence of pain if these are not the usual behaviors of the person.

Be aware of movement and postural changes such as **rocking, arching forward or backward, and lying in a fetal position.**

Other indicators of pain may be **aggression** or **agitation** in an individual who has never or rarely displayed these behaviors. **Even unusually fidgeting may indicate pain.**

People who are unable to communicate their pain are at risk of not having their pain relieved and they are at risk of not having the underlying conditions that cause their pain treated. For both reasons, it is important to talk to healthcare providers about possible pain associated with a person's condition and to **observe changes in a person's behavior**, which may indicate the presence of pain.