

## Pain Tolerability and the 10-Point Scale

*A study suggests that asking about pain tolerability has advantages over using a 0-to-10-point numerical rating.*

The common practice of asking patients to rate their pain on a 10-point scale might suggest that the goal of pain therapy always is to achieve a score of 0. Investigators in New York explored the relation between pain tolerability and numerical pain severity in 663 primary care patients (median age, 62) who received prescriptions for analgesics or who had chronic-pain diagnoses (mostly osteoarthritis or back pain). Patients were asked if pain was tolerable (possible answers: yes, no, or not in pain) and then were asked to rate pain severity during the prior 24 hours on a 0-to-10-point scale. Patients who rated their pain as 0 were excluded.

No patients who rated their pain severity as 1 to 3 reported that their pain was intolerable. Among patients who rated their pain as 4 to 6, 19% rated their pain as intolerable. Of patients who rated their pain as 7 to 10, 53% rated it as intolerable.

### COMMENT

This study demonstrates that a substantial proportion of patients consider their pain to be tolerable — even those who rate their pain in the 5-to-10-point range. Clinicians have been conditioned to prescribe pain medication to anyone who rates pain in the moderate-to-severe range of a 10-point scale. But this study suggests that inquiring about pain tolerability probably is a better approach. Patients who rate their pain as tolerable frequently manage without receiving escalating doses of analgesics, and asking about pain tolerability might temper patients' sometimes unrealistic expectations for complete pain relief. — **Thomas L. Schwenk, MD**

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Markman JD et al. Comparison of a pain tolerability question with the numeric rating scale for assessment of self-reported chronic pain. *JAMA Netw Open* 2020 Apr 1; 3:e203155. (<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.3155>)