Pain medications are an important part of a doctor’s armamentarium of treatments. Without pain medications we would have a hard time taking care of our patient’s needs. They’re one of the most wonderful medications available to mankind and yet they are one of the most controversial substances we prescribe.

Here’s the simple fact. **There’s no proof they make you better!** Think about it. They don’t decrease inflammation like Advil, aspirin or prescription medication like Celebrex. They don’t help bones or ligaments or incisions heal. They don’t kill bacteria like antibiotics. They don’t even help the pain at the site of the problem like ice does. They only alter your mind’s perception of pain.

Here’s another fact. It’s okay to tolerate pain. And in fact you should tolerate some pain. It’s your brain’s way of telling you there’s something going on. Take it easy. Give into it a little. Rest it. Ice it. Call a doctor, especially if the pain is severe or getting worse or fails to get better with time!

Some people have a very high tolerance for pain. Some have no tolerance for it at all. I’m not sure exactly what that means and it’s different for everyone. But I do know that low tolerance often results in reaching for a pain pill. So that results in the behavior of taking a pill for pain. I call it the **“I have pain...I take a pill”** syndrome. I see this even in children. Children have a pretty high tolerance to pain in general; especially if they are reassured by their parents and doctors that it’s going to get better! But many parents ask for pain pills for their child’s pain, even when the child is not asking to be relieved of the pain. That may initiate the I-have-pain-I-take-a-pill syndrome.

Here’s something else. Pain pills work by dulling your brain to the feeling of pain! Duh. So does it make sense to take a pain pill in order to be able to go to work? Or to be able to tolerate exercise? Or to be able to entertain visitors for the weekend? NO! If you’re awake and alert, your brain is now trying to focus on whatever it is you’re doing AND at the same time, tolerate the pain! And all the while it’s trying to go to sleep so it won’t suffer the pain. That behavior just exercises your brain to tolerate the pain pill and NOT the pain. Now you tell me you need more pain pills or stronger pain pills because the ones you’re taking aren’t killing the pain while you’re working, exercising or entertaining! If you’re having that much pain, then you shouldn’t be doing those things. You should be resting and if you’re taking pain meds, you should be allowing them to do their thing to your brain. So rest it.
I have seen this scenario played out a million times. A patient is in the hospital, having had surgery or an injury. They are surrounded by family members, who are talking to each other and the recovering patient. They are chatting with the nurses. The heavily sedated patient is trying to keep up. Then he complains of pain and the family is running to the nurse for more pain pills. Or even worse, the patient is asleep, totally zoned out in a narcotized, pain-free bliss. The nurse comes in and asks if the sleeping patient is in pain. What does the family member do? They poke Joe in the arm and ask him if he’s in pain of course. Now his brain has been alerted and is searching frantically for that sensation of pain and then the sensation of narcotic so it can slide back into that blissful state. He groggily responds. “Arrghshripoggh...yessh.” And immediately the family...“Yes! Yes! He’s In pain! Get him something for the pain! He needs more!” Then they can get back to their Sudoku or their TV shows as Joe gets quiet again.

**Just because you have pain, doesn’t mean you need a pain pill.** First of all if the pain is excruciating, maybe there’s something wrong. You should check with your doctor if it’s so bad that nothing is making any difference.

But if the pain is moderate, there’s nothing wrong with trying to tolerate it a little! Try some other methods to make it better; like ice or elevation, sleep or rest, watch a little TV. Stimulate the brain in some other healthy way or don’t stimulate the brain and take a nap.

And parents, as your children start getting injuries or painful conditions, don’t jump to offering them a pill, even if it’s just Tylenol or children’s Advil. While these are good alternatives to narcotics for your child’s pain, often the child just needs a little TLC. I always kept little ice cups or homemade gel packs (see my article on “Ice Recipes”) in the freezer so if they had a pain, and I could see that their ankle wasn’t turned around backwards or they weren’t standing in a pool of blood or pus, then I would offer them a hug and a kiss and an ice pack or ice massage. That’s much better than a pill and the next time they have a boo boo, they’re reaching for the ice pack and a hug rather than a pill. That leads to a good habit rather than a bad one. My children have very high pain tolerances (whatever that is) and prefer not to take medications. They’ll take one if they need one (like when my son’s ankle was turned around backwards), but they stop them quickly and tolerate moderate pain.

It’s pretty easy to get addicted to prescription narcotics. And it’s very hard to reverse that behavior. You don’t have to be a “bad person” to become dependent on these potentially toxic medications. If you take enough of them for an extended period of time, you will start to require them in order to function. At first you need them to take the edge off the pain. Most pain doesn’t totally resolve after a couple of days or even weeks, so your brain will convince you of the need to continue to take pain pills, because after all, you still have pain. Then it becomes difficult to determine if the pain is improving or if it’s actually getting worse because gradually you need more medications to relieve it. Soon your doctor refuses to give you the amount you want, so you start asking other doctors for additional pills. You ask friends and family members to lend you some of theirs. You pretend to lose your pills and request an early refill. A new, even more painful condition develops. This is a pattern we see too many times.
So what’s all the fuss? Well it’s because there is a larger and larger population of people getting addicted to these medications. Doctors are frustrated because it makes it hard to effectively treat these patients and to try to determine whether or not they are truly getting well. The insurance companies are paying for exorbitant numbers of narcotics and there’s no ceiling in sight. The Drug Enforcement Agency and in this state, the Texas Board of Medical Examiners, are all over us to limit the prescription of narcotics. They’re closely monitoring doctors and their prescribing habits.

So help us out. Take pain pills only when absolutely necessary and only when nothing else works. Try a little ice and rest first. And look for someone who can give you a little TLC. Call your mom!