

# Pain Thermometer Scale Overview

The Pain Thermometer is an adaptation of the traditional Verbal Descriptor Scale (VDS) that aligns a thermometer alongside the options of words that represent varying levels of pain severity. The thermometer facilitates the understanding and communication of pain severity, particularly by those with diminished cognitive capacity and difficulty with abstract thinking. Patients are shown the scale and asked to think that as temperature rises in a thermometer, pain also increases as you move to the top of the scale. The original pain thermometer was evaluated in earlier research<sup>1</sup> and a revised version of the tool, the Iowa Pain Thermometer (IPT), has been shown to be a good choice for both younger and older patients.<sup>2</sup> These combined verbal and thermometer scales have been shown to be the most preferred and easiest to understand tools for assessing pain in older persons and are recommended by national and international guideline panels on pain in older persons.<sup>3,4</sup>

The modified IPT consists of seven pain descriptors representing different levels of pain intensity (no pain, slight pain, mild pain, moderate pain, severe pain, very severe pain, and the most intense pain imaginable) plus response options between words (scores from 0 to 12) and aligns with a pain thermometer to assist with the conceptualization of pain as identified by preliminary research.<sup>1,2</sup> Other preliminary testing of the IPT with Caucasian and minority older adults, including African-Americans and Hispanics, has found it to be reliable and valid and the preferred scale by many subjects.<sup>5-7</sup> The IPT demonstrated the lowest failure rate of all pain intensity scales evaluated in a recent study and was sensitive in detecting changes in pain intensity both before and after joint injection in older persons with osteoarthritis pain.<sup>8</sup>

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## References

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