

The Analgesic Ladder

Nursing

Stepped analgesia, with the adjuvants and monitoring beside every rung.

Climb for uncontrolled pain; descend as it settles. Adjuvants apply at every step.

1

Step 1 • Non-opioid

Paracetamol or an NSAID, with the usual cautions for each.

2

Step 2 • Weak opioid

Added to, not substituted for, the step 1 agent.

3

Step 3 • Strong opioid

Titrated to effect, with breakthrough provision planned.

4

Adjuvants

Neuropathic agents, steroids, antispasmodics at any step.

5

Non-drug measures

Position, heat, distraction, explanation, sleep.

Educational reference. Original WHO framing was cancer pain; use in other pain is debated. All choices and doses follow local prescribing