Pharmacologic approaches to pain management

WHO 3-Step Ladder

**Step 1, Mild Pain**
- Aspirin (ASA)
- Acetaminophen (Acet)
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
  + Adjuvants

“Adjuvants” refers either to medications that are coadministered to manage an adverse effect of an opioid, or to so-called adjuvant analgesics that are added to enhance analgesia.

**Step 2, Moderate Pain**
- Acet or ASA +
- Codeine
- Hydrocodone
- Oxycodone
- Dihydrocodeine
- Tramadol (not available with ASA or Acet)
  + Adjuvants

**Step 3, Severe Pain**
- Morphine
- Hydromorphone
- Methadone
- Levorphanol
- Fentanyl
- Oxycodone
  ± Nonopioid analgesics
  ± Adjuvants

In 1986, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a 3-step conceptual model to guide the management of cancer pain. It provides a simple, well-tested approach for the rational selection, administration, and titration of a myriad of analgesics. Today, there is worldwide consensus favoring its use for the medical management of all pain associated with serious illness.