

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

How to keep active with persistent pain

Many people with pain find it hard to do all the everyday activities they want to. This leaflet explains an approach called pacing, which allows you to do more activities without increasing your pain.

How it works

When you have persistent pain, some days are better than others. On better days you may get on with things around the house or other important activities. A busy day of activity is often followed by hours or even days of a flare of pain, when you may be able to do very little.

With a pacing approach, you aim to pack less into a good day so you do not trigger a flare up of your pain. This means you have more good days. When having a good day, aim to do about the same manageable amount of activity each day. Once you can manage this most days without triggering a flare, you can slowly build up your activity levels.

What you do

Pacing isn't easy. The way we do activity becomes a habit, and many people with persistent pain develop the habit of pushing through pain, triggering a flare.

To pace, you must aim to change your posture or activity before your pain becomes aggravated or increased. To do this you must first know how much you can do without triggering a flare. It is probably less than you think.

Step 1 – finding your baselines

Find out what your tolerance is for different postures and activities.

One way to do this is by timing yourself doing the activities you struggle with, such as walking, sitting or standing. It is best to do this on an average day, rather than a better day.

Important – time yourself to the point that you first notice the pain increasing. This 'first noticing' is key to setting an effective baseline that is a reliable time you can use to pace.

To set the baseline, take about 25% (a 1/4) off the times you have for chosen activity. So, if you can walk for 4 minutes before the pain starts to increase, your baseline time will be 3 minutes. Make a note of your baseline times, and begin step 2 over the page.

Are flares dangerous?

No, flares are not a sign of danger or damage. Flares, or increases of pain, are a symptom of persistent pain; that is, the pain system has become switched on and sensitised, but no damage has occurred. However, rest and recovery from flares will slowly reduce your fitness levels, which can make your pain system even more sensitive to activity.

Step 2 - use your baselines to pace

When pacing, you are aiming to achieve a more consistent or steady level of activity, with less 'boom and bust' flares.

Use your baseline times to guide how frequently you need to change your posture or activity. Change according to time, rather than waiting for pain to make you change or move.

Some everyday examples

If preparing a meal, switch between sitting and standing or perching on a stool. Do not sit or stand longer than your baseline times.

If out walking, switch between walking, pausing and leaning or stretching and sitting. If possible, plan your route to allow this. At first you may need to restrict the distance you walk to make sure you stay within your baseline times. You can build up your walking over time.

If doing gardening, switch between low jobs and high jobs. Again, you may need to restrict the overall time you spend in the garden at first, such as 10 minutes a day, but you can build this up over time.

Other ways to pace

You can also pace by planning your day ahead and sticking to a manageable level of activity. If you planned to do 10 minutes of ironing, stick to 10 minutes. Do not be tempted to do more because you feel okay – you want to stay feeling okay.

Use natural breaks in jobs to switch postures; break vacuuming into small parts such as one room or even half a room a day. Use advert breaks on TV to remind yourself to stand and stretch.

Working?

If you are working you may need expert advice to pace at work. Sometimes equipment can help, such as a desk that allows you work in both sitting and standing. An occupational therapist can recommend changes to the way your work is structured so that you can pace more easily.

Contact details

Pacing is an effective approach for managing activity with pain, but it is not an easy technique to learn.

If you have any further questions please speak to your health professional in Pain Management or ask for a referral to an occupational therapist specialist in pain management.

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service:

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

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