

# Pain Management Info Session 1: Pacing

Information for patients

This information sheet summarises the key information presented during the Pain Management Information session 1 at the Ipswich Hospital Pain Management Unit.

Pacing is a key skill for managing chronic pain. This leaflet explains:

- some of the unhelpful patterns of activity which can develop when someone has a chronic pain condition;
- how pacing can help address these unhelpful patterns; and
- what pacing is, and how to do it.

## Patterns of activity with chronic pain

Chronic pain usually affects how active a person is. Often certain patterns of activity can develop. These next examples of patterns of activity are all quite normal (but not very helpful) ways in which what we do is affected by chronic pain.

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### Example 1: Clare

Clare has neck and arm pain. Her activity levels are high and she is determined not to 'give in to her pain'. She pushes herself to keep going which often makes her pain worse but she has heard of the saying 'no pain no gain' so feels she is letting her pain win if she rests. Clare is constantly more active than her pain allows and feels that just getting through the day is very hard work and tiring. She often feels upset and frustrated that despite her best efforts the pain is 'winning the battle'.

Constant over-activity with chronic pain – as in Clare's case – can open the pain gates, increasing pain. In the long term, this will cause changes to our pain system that increase its sensitivity to pain.

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### Example 2: Lucy

Lucy has back and leg pain, she had a back operation two years ago, but her pain continued after the surgery. Lucy has recognised the pattern of good and bad days with her pain and is aware that it can be linked to what she does. She tries to avoid doing too much in fear of increasing her pain, at least this way she can keep on top of the things she can manage. Lucy has noticed that she feels a lot less fit and is tired when she tries to do anything. Lucy's quality of life has changed dramatically over the last few years and she doesn't have much energy left for the things she used to enjoy.

Constantly avoiding activity, as in Lucy's case, will cause 'de-conditioning'. This means joints become stiffer and muscles become tighter and weaker, often adding extra symptoms to the original problem. Being inactive has major effects on most body systems including the heart, lungs, bones and digestive systems. With prolonged inactivity our body becomes even less able to cope with chronic pain.

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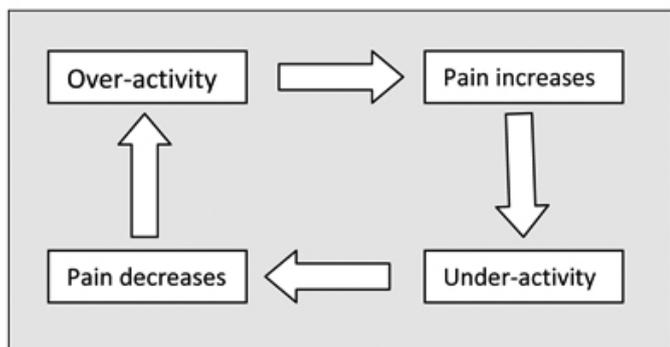
### Example 3: Tom

Tom has back pain which has been fairly constant for the last five years. He finds that he has good days and bad days. On a good day he tries to get things done, to catch up with jobs around the house and to shop and garden. Sometimes he gets away with quite a lot of activities but he usually ends up having a bad day the next day or a few days later. When Tom's pain is worse he finds he has to do less and he normally spends bad days resting at home. As time goes by he notices that he seems able to do less and less each time he has a good day. Tom can rarely plan ahead as he doesn't know how his pain will be.



Often people in pain will move between 'over-doing' and 'under-doing', and like Tom get caught in a vicious cycle of over-activity followed by under-activity. When caught in this vicious cycle both de-conditioning (from resting on bad days) and pain sensitisation (from overdoing on a good day) can occur.

The cycle can look like this:



## How to change patterns of activity for the better

Pacing is a skill which can help to address and change these unhelpful patterns of activity. It involves taking a more balanced approach to activity and maintaining a more even level of activity over each day, and then over the week.

### The idea behind pacing

Our joints and muscles will tolerate different activities and positions for a period of time before that activity or position starts to become uncomfortable or more painful. This period of time is known as our 'tolerance'.

Often these levels of tolerance decrease when we have a chronic pain problem. 'Pushing on' with the activity or position above our tolerance time causes our pain gates to open, increasing pain further. This can lead into the over-activity/under-activity cycle.

Pacing involves avoiding pushing on and over-doing these tolerances by changing activity or position **before** we reach our tolerance and notice an increase in pain. This breaks the links in the over-activity / under-activity cycle.

**The aim of pacing is for the pain to be at the same level when we finish an activity as it was when we started it.**

## How to pace

Most people without a chronic pain problem would normally use discomfort as the signal that they have exceeded their tolerance, and to change position or activity, such as sitting down when their legs get tired. However if you have chronic pain, by the time your pain has increased enough to signal that you need to change position or activity, your pain gates will have already opened, increasing your pain.

The idea of pacing is to change activity or position **before** you reach your tolerance and your pain increases to the 'next level'.

Once you know how long you are able to keep doing an activity or be in a position without your pain rising higher (in other words, you know your tolerance), you can use this amount of time as a cue to change position or activity.

Some people measure how long they have been doing something by using a timer or setting an alarm. Other people break an activity up into small chunks that they have calculated as being manageable without increasing their pain (chunks of time shorter than their tolerance.)

Pacing means that you move from activity to activity (or position to position) allowing your muscles and joints plenty of variety and not staying in one position or doing one activity for long enough to exceed your tolerances and increase your pain.

It does **not** necessarily mean that you need to rest between each activity, as the idea is to spread your activity level more evenly through the day.

### The benefits of pacing

As activity levels become more stable when pacing, over time our bodies have a chance to become fitter and tolerances can be gradually increased.

Over the short-term, pain levels are reduced and feel more manageable. Over the longer-term, we are able to do more, with lower pain levels. The good news is that over time, pacing actually allows us to begin to desensitise the over-sensitive pain system by changing the way our nerves work, which results in lower pain levels long-term.



## Some examples of pacing

These examples are only to give some ideas. In reality, different people will have different tolerances.

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### Example 1: Clare

Clare finds the ironing really difficult as it increases her neck and arm pain. She can iron for about three minutes which is roughly how long it takes her to iron one shirt.

If she tries to do more than this her pain increases for the rest of the day. She has found that if she spreads what she needs to iron over three days she is faced with about twelve minutes of ironing or three items of clothing each day. Clare has paced this by ironing one item and then stopping putting the item on a hanger and walking upstairs to put the item away. She also changes her position slightly by perching on a stool to iron the second item and standing for the first and third items.

Clare found this quite frustrating at first as she preferred to get the whole thing done at once, but after a few weeks she has recognised her pain is not so bad on either a Sunday (when she used to iron) or the day afterwards.

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### Example 2: Lucy

Lucy can manage to walk to the end of her road and back without increasing her leg pain, she has started walking to the end of the road and back on a daily basis. After two weeks she felt better about doing this as she was not so tired or out of breath after her daily walk. She first increased her tolerance by adding in half of the distance to the next lamp post along (about an extra 20 metres). She has increased her walk by this distance every ten days or so. It has taken her three months but she has now doubled her walking tolerance and is more able to cope with other activities that involve walking.

This is an example of how by pacing within her tolerances, Lucy was able to manage a regular walk. Notice how over time, she gradually added to the walk by small amounts which didn't increase her pain further, and by doing so increased her tolerances.

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### Example 2: Tom

Tom finds sitting still for over twenty minutes increases his back pain. He enjoys watching films as they help distract him from his pain, but he often feels worse for a few days afterwards and dreads getting up once the film is over as his pain is so bad. Tom has managed to pace his sitting by setting a timer every 15 minutes. Each time the timer goes off he gets up and moves. Sometimes he watches the film standing for a few minutes, sometimes he pauses the film to make a cup of tea and sometimes he does some simple stretches. He still finds his pain increases slightly by the end of the film but it settles quickly to its normal level and he is not in increased pain for the next few days.

By breaking up the amount of time he sits for, Tom is pacing successfully. It is just as important to pace sitting as any other activity or position.

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## Key points about pacing

- The aim is to break the over-activity/ under-activity cycle.
- Aim to maintain an even level of activity over the day, and over the week.
- Break tasks into smaller chunks.
- Change activity or position **before the pain increases**.
- Be prepared to delegate jobs, ask for help, and say 'no' if you have to.
- Gradually increase the amount you do as your body gets more able to tolerate longer periods of the activity.
- Break up activities and tasks by swapping between activities, changing positions and stretching.