

# Managing activity

Information for you



## How do other people with persistent pain manage activities?

Everyone approaches activities in different ways.

- **Being generally overactive:** Some people are in the habit of doing so much activity that they are probably overdoing it. This keeps the nervous system ‘wound up’ or on ‘high alert’. This may work in the short-term but people are often unable to keep this up in the long-term.
- **Being generally underactive:** Some people may have cut back on activity too much as a result of pain. They may find that they are doing very little of the things that are important to them.
- **Being over and then underactive:** Many people ride the roller coaster of good and bad days. Overdoing activities on good days and then suffering the consequences and experiencing bad days as a result. On bad days people usually cut back on activity and rest more. This then leads to a good day and they overdo it again. This may seem to work well in the short-term but may not work in the long-term.

## Turn to page eight for an example; how does Mark manage his activity?

Some people may switch between these three ways of managing their activity. Not everyone manages their activity in these ways, but most people do. If you are not sure what you do, it might be useful to keep an activity diary (see page six) for one week, recording what you do and when.

## Being generally overactive

People who are generally overactive are often very busy, juggling responsibilities and taking care of lots of things and other people. This can work for a while but may mean that they are not really taking care of their own needs. It is also difficult to keep going like this long-term.

## How do I stop being overactive?

It’s not easy, but it may be worth trying these steps:

- Identify what is really important to you and whether you are using your time and energy to do these important things or other things.
- Do less, or do more of the things that are important to you rather than the things that aren’t.
- Take care of your own needs and make time to do more things for yourself. Say no more often to other people, if saying yes costs you and is not sustainable.
- Ask for help.



## Being generally underactive

Some people may have cut back on activity as a result of pain to such an extent that they find that they are doing very little of the things that are important to them. They may feel pretty fed-up as a result. Sometimes this is because people are frightened of increased pain, or worry that pain means they are causing themselves harm or damage. People may have tried hard to be active but it hasn't worked so they have given up.

### How do I stop being underactive?

There are a few things worth considering:

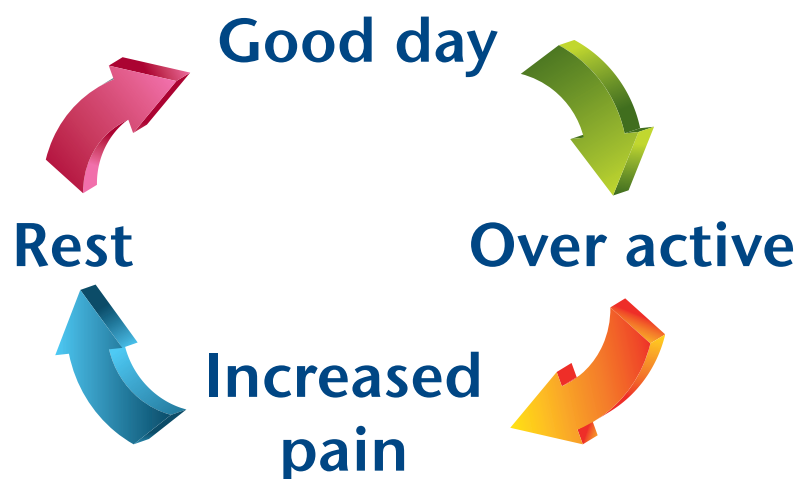
- A good place to start is to identify what would motivate you to do more. Generally this will be something that is important to you, it may be something enjoyable or something you find rewarding.
- It's important to remember that when you have persistent pain, hurt doesn't usually mean harm. As you start to do more you may get a little increase in symptoms. This is common and is not a sign that you are causing any harm or damage.
- Start small and build things up slowly so you maximise your chances of being able to do it.
- Try not to put things off as there will always be a reason not to do something and it's easy to talk yourself out of it. Choose one thing that you think is manageable and just do it.

## Being over and then underactive

People with persistent pain often say they have good and bad days. On a good day they try to make the most of it and tend to be more active. They might go shopping or do some digging in the garden. Sometimes they keep going until the pain stops them.

Other people say that activities aren't always painful at the time. Often it is later that day, the next day or even the day after that they pay for it with increased pain. On these bad days, they struggle to be active and tend to rest or do less as a result.

Because they are less active on bad days the pain does usually settle a bit and they have another good day. The tendency is to continue in this good day/bad day cycle.



You may recognise that you do this. In the short-term, it seems to work. However, in the long-term it can be quite unhelpful due to what is called 'deconditioning'.

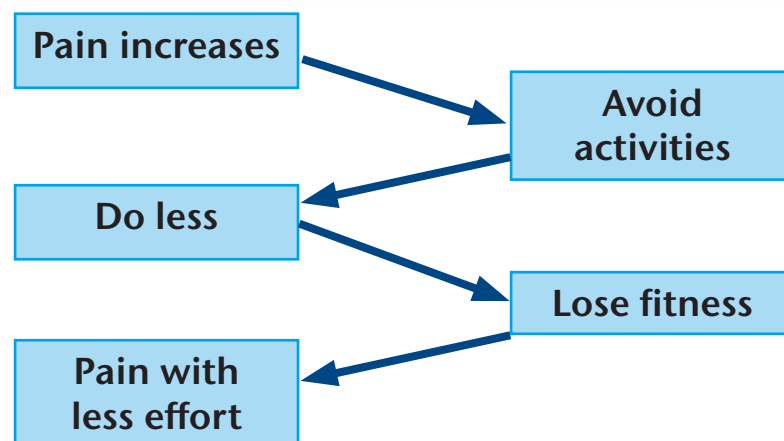
## Deconditioning

On bad days, people tend to do less or rest more. Over time, these periods of doing less mean that:

- Joints become stiffer and tight
- Muscles become weaker and ache more
- Balance and co-ordination aren't as good
- People have less energy and get tired more quickly

As a result, the body becomes out of condition and is less physically able to cope with activity and the pain comes on sooner or increases sooner when you do activities. Over time, people find they are doing less and less, even on a good day. It can seem like you are getting worse medically when in fact you are getting out of condition physically. Pain is in control of how much you do and when, **not you**. This may make you feel angry, frustrated, irritable and down and is completely understandable.

### The downward spiral



**Pacing and graded activity are useful methods of managing and increasing your activity levels**

## Pacing

Pacing involves breaking down activities into smaller steps, resting between steps or doing small amounts regularly rather than a large amount of activity in one go. The aim is to reduce the sensitivity of the nervous system.

Pacing is about choosing a level of activity that you can keep up, rather than choosing just based on how you feel. If you choose based on how you feel (pain, fatigue, mood) and it's a good day the risk is that you will overdo it and if it's a bad day the risk is you will underdo it. Instead, try to ask yourself 'what do I want to do and how much should I do now so that I can still do other things later today, and the rest of the week?'



If you think it might be helpful, use the pacing plan on page six to plan your activities. “Do what you plan, not what you feel” can be a good motto for pacing.

## Graded activity

Graded activity involves gradually increasing activity step-by-step at a rate that is manageable.



### How does graded activity work?

**1. Decide what activity you want to build up.** It may be best to start with just one or two activities. This should be an activity you want to do, and allows you to achieve your goals. For example, if your goal is to go shopping with your friends, the activity you might choose to build up is walking.

**2. Work out your starting point.** This is how much of the activity you can do now, on a good or a bad day without stirring up your pain at the time or later.

The most common mistake people make is that they try to do too much to start with. No amount is too small, it's better to start small and be able to manage it. If it turns out that it was too small, you can always do more next time.

Try and work out what would be realistic starting points in the following example:

- **John wants to increase his walking. He knows that at the moment he can walk for 20 minutes, but only just, it's a real struggle and he realises he's overdone it later.**

It might be sensible for John to start with ten minutes as he knows 20 minutes is a struggle.

**3. Fill in a graded activity plan.** Write up your plan for the week ahead on the charts your physiotherapist has given you.

**4. Try and make sure your plan progresses in small, equal steps,** increasing by a small amount every second day.

You should feel confident you can achieve your plan.

Your confidence level where zero is no confidence and ten is complete confidence should be at least a seven.

A little increase in your symptoms is normal, to be expected and should settle quickly. Remind yourself that you are not causing any harm.



Here is an example of John's graded activity plan.

Activity grading up	Starting point	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Walking	10 minutes	10 minutes	10 minutes	12 minutes	12 minutes	14 minutes	14 minutes	16 minutes

**5. Try to stick to the plan on good and bad days as much as possible**, as otherwise you might slip back into the over/under activity cycle. If it's a very bad day, you could do it slower, or break it up into do-able chunks.

**6. Review the plan** at the end of the week. Depending on how you have got on you may decide to increase, slow down or maintain the rate of progression.

If you felt it was too easy, you could speed the rate of progression up. For example, by doing a bit more every day rather than every second day.

If you have struggled, perhaps your starting point and maybe your rate of progression were too ambitious! You could increase by a smaller amount or increase every third day rather than every second.

**7. Write the next week's plan.**

You can apply these principles to almost anything. Progress can be slow and isn't always straightforward, but these set backs are useful learning points. Remember that slow progress is steady progress and more likely to be maintained.

Now it's your turn:

- Decide what activity you want to build up
- Work out a sensible amount to start with
- Fill in a graded activity plan for the week
- Try and stick to your plan as much as possible
- Review the plan at the end of the week and slow the rate of progression down, speed it up, or keep it the same
- Fill in the plan for the next week and so on

Writing a graded activity plan might not work well for every type of activity and it might not always be necessary but many patients have found them useful.

Managing activities is part of a series of reliable, evidence-based advice to support you along the way to improving your function and quality of life, with pain.

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Further information is available from:

Pain Association Scotland

[www.painassociation.com](http://www.painassociation.com)

NHS Ayrshire and Arran  
Pain Management Website

[www.nhsaaa.net/pain-management-service/](http://www.nhsaaa.net/pain-management-service/)

Pain Concern

[www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk)



# Activity diary/pacing plan: Name

Date

If you are unsure how you manage your activity levels at the moment, it might be useful to complete this activity diary for one week, recording what you do and when:

## Monday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

## Tuesday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

## Wednesday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

## Thursday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

## Friday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

## Saturday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

## Sunday (details and time)

am -

Day time -

Evening/sleep -

# Graded activity record sheet

Name ..... Date .....

Activity to be graded up .....

- Decide on your starting point..... (distance/time/amount).  
This is how much of the activity you can do now, on a good or bad day without stirring up your pain at the time or later.
- Decide how you are going to progress. Try and increase it by a small amount every other day.
- You should feel confident that you can achieve your plan.
- Try to stick to the plan on good or bad days. Tick it off when you have done each day's amount.
- Review it at the end of the week and set your plan for the next week. Progress the next week's plan according to how you got on overall from the last week.
- You could decide when you will do this activity and put it in your pacing plan.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week one							
Week two							
Week three							
Week four							





## How did Mark manage his activity?

Mark loved his garden and really took pride in his vegetable and flower beds. Mark had been struggling with increased pain for a while and hadn't done much gardening. One Saturday he felt a bit better.

"Right that's it ... I'm going to get stuck in and get the garden sorted" he said.

### After an hour

He thought: "I used to be able to do this part of the garden all in one go, I'm not going to let this pain beat me, I'm determined to finish the job." Mark worked hard all morning.

For the next three days he was in a lot more pain and rested. Mark felt useless and fed up.

Ask yourself - Is it still realistic and sensible for Mark to do it all in one go now that he has persistent pain? Can he win a fight against pain? How might he go about doing some gardening in a sustainable way, without overdoing it?

### Three days later

Mark thought: "At last! I'm feeling a bit better. I don't know when I'll feel like this again, I'd better make the most of it." But this time after an hour he was really struggling.

"It's no good I can't go on. I've done even less this time."

### Three weeks later

"I've really tried but I can't do any gardening. It's just too much for me. It's hopeless. I'm too embarrassed to ask for help."

### Six months later

"I've had to give up doing the gardening. I really miss it and feel fed up looking at it."

"It's not just that the pain is getting worse. I also seem to be getting weaker. There must be something causing it but they say they can't find anything."

"I'm only 45. What will I be like in ten years? I'm really worried."

Ask yourself: Why might Mark be getting stiffer and weaker?

Do you think he could be stuck in the over/under activity cycle?

Does it matter if the garden isn't as neat and tidy as it was? Could he ask someone to help? Did he have to give it up or could he have found a way to do it, at a sustainable level? If he decided that it was important to him to keep gardening and he did a small amount in one go, might that increase his chances of being able to still enjoy gardening?

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