

## **HOW DO PEOPLE WITH PAIN MANAGE ACTIVITIES?**

### **Information for you**

Everyone manages their activity levels in different ways.

**Being generally overactive:** Some people are in the habit of doing so much activity that they are probably overdoing it. 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 because of pain to such an extent that they 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 then overdo it again. This may seem to work well in the short-term but may not work in the long-term.

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 unsure what you do, it might be useful to keep an activity diary for one week, recording what you do and when.

### **Being general overactive**

People who are generally overactive are often very busy, juggling responsibilities and taking care of many 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 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 to other people, if saying yes costs you and is not sustainable.
- Ask for help.

## Being over then under active

People with chronic pain often say that 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 = overactive, bad day = underactive 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 for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is the effect of 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 quicker

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. This is completely understandable.

**There are alternatives to the Over- Under Activity cycle. These are called Pacing and Graded Activity.**

## Pacing

Pacing involves consistently engaging in the activities you want to do by working out what you could do now in order to also be active later in the day, tomorrow and the rest of the week. It may involve breaking down activities into smaller steps, resting between steps or doing small amounts regularly rather than a large amount of activity in one go.

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 X to plan your activities.

## 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 allow 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.

The most common mistake people make is that they try to do too much to start with. No amount is too small, it is 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 to 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 15 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 that you could achieve your plan. Your confidence level where 0 is no confidence and 10 is complete confidence should be at least a 7/10.

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	Starting Point	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Grading up								
Walking	10 mins	10 mins	10 mins	12 mins	12 mins	14 mins	14 mins	16 mins

5. **Try and 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 weeks 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 activity 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.

Further information is available from:

- [www.chronicpainscotland.org](http://www.chronicpainscotland.org)
- [www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk)

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## 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:

If you want to, write whether you had a good or bad day at the bottom.

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
1.00 am							
2.00 am							
3.00 am							
4.00 am							
5.00 am							
6.00 am							
7.00 am							
8.00 am							
9.00 am							
10.00 am							
11.00 am							
Noon							
1.00 pm							
2.00 pm							
3.00 pm							
4.00 pm							
5.00 pm							
6.00 pm							
7.00 pm							
8.00 pm							
9.00 pm							
10.00 pm							
11.00 pm							
Midnight							
Good or bad day							

# Graded Activity Record Sheet

Name

Start date of plan

Activity to be graded up - .....

- Decide 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, for example, by increasing the amount by a small amount every other day.
- You should feel confident that you could achieve your plan.  
Your confidence level where 0 is no confidence and 10 is complete confidence should be at least a 7/10.
- 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 the next weeks plan. 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.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week One							
Week Two							
Week Three							
Week Four							