



Core Clinical Services

North Bristol **NHS**  
NHS Trust

# The Pain Management Programme: Living with chronic pain



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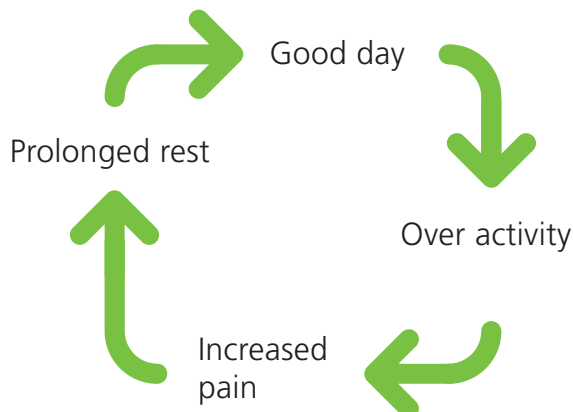
## Living with chronic pain

Chronic pain often leads to changes in people's activity levels and way of life. These are some of the common changes that people have mentioned:

- Reduced working hours or stopping paid work.
- Reduced level of housework or maintenance work.
- Decreased pleasurable activity.
- Decreased social activities.
- Not trying new activities.
- Rest or lying down during the day.
- Overdoing activity levels.
- Difficulties with concentration and memory.
- Reduced confidence and motivation.
- Reduced fitness.

### The Activity Cycle

People with chronic pain often say that they tend to push themselves until the pain tells them to stop. They are able to push themselves more on better days, but then the pain can sometimes increase later in the day or the next day. This is usually followed by a period of rest, and feelings of frustration and despair.



This is known as the “Activity Cycle”. Every time you overdo it doing an activity, you will be more likely to avoid this activity in the future. When you have had a setback like this, your body begins to lose “condition”: joints become stiffer and muscles weaker. Consequently you will be less able to cope with any increased activity in the future.

### People stay in the Activity Cycle because

- There is work that "has to be done".
- It feels better to finish the job.
- Of feeling guilty about overloading others.
- Of trying to ignore or beat the pain.

### What are the negative consequences of the Activity Cycle?

- More frequent flare-ups of pain.
- More tempting to avoid activities to avoid flare-ups.
- Harder to make longer term progress with activity.
- Pain decides how much you do, not you.
- Feelings of frustration and failure.

### How to break the Activity Cycle and increase activity

There are several different strategies that will be covered during the course of the programme. The first one we will consider is called “pacing”, and the second is called “pacing up”.

#### Pacing

Pacing means varying activities and positions regularly throughout the day. It also means working out your tolerance to an activity that is not likely to cause a flare-up. People often know how much of an activity is likely to be too much, but it often takes more thought to work out how much is just right. This “just right” level is known as a “baseline”.

Pacing will help you to plan your day, so that you can predict more accurately how much you will be able to do from day to day. By keeping to your plan you may find that you have flare-ups of pain less often. This will mean that your plans for the future are more likely to succeed.

Pacing means working out your baseline for a range of activities, and sticking to your baseline even if you could do more on a good day. Examples of baselines are:

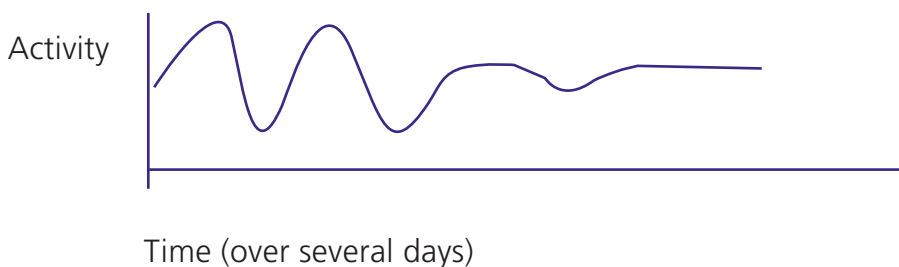
Walking for 100 yards...

Washing up five plates...

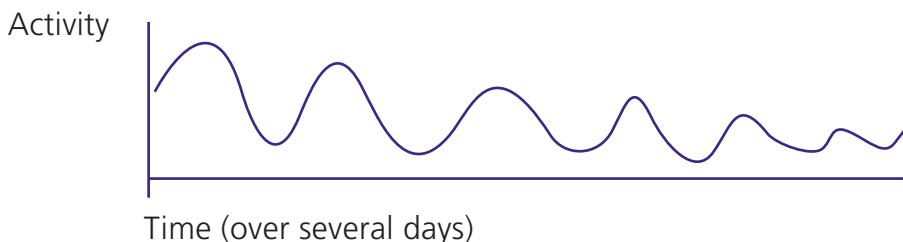
Sitting for ten minutes...

Do not wait for the pain to tell you when to stop: use your watch, or perhaps a kitchen timer, or notice how much of an activity you have done. This will mean that you are controlling your activity levels, rather than the pain being in charge. Remember, you are not trying to “fight” the pain.

### **(a) Levelling out activity by effective pacing**



### **(b) Reduction of activity through ineffective pacing**



## Guidelines to pacing

- **Prioritise.** What are the most important things that need to be done today? It can be tempting to try to finish your list of jobs for the day, but it might be that some of the jobs are less important, and can be put off until a quieter day.
- **Plan.** Use your past experience to plan ahead. Are some activities more challenging, and how will you break them up so that they are more manageable? At first, you might benefit from keeping a diary or a calendar to help you to work out how best to structure your day. Plan in the order of different activities, thinking about whether you will need help and when it might be available. When do you plan to take rests?
- **Set your baselines.** Work out your level for each activity in your plan. With practice this can become “second nature”.
- **Look back at your past plans and learn from them.** Did you get it just right, or could you improve your planning next time?

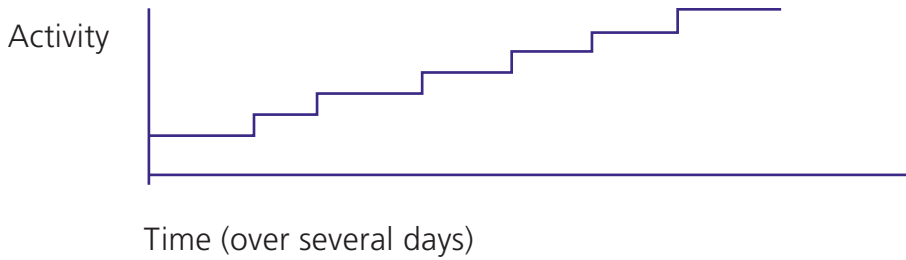
## Pacing up activity

Once you have successfully worked out your baselines, there may be activities which you would like to do more of. Try these strategies to see if they help you to achieve the increases that you are aiming for.

- **Decide on a sensible increase to pace up by.** As an example, think about someone who has a baseline for walking of 5 minutes. If they try to improve to 10 minutes in one go, they are not likely to be successful. If they aim to improve to five and a half minutes, they are more likely to be successful.
- **Allow time to get used to a new level before increasing again.** Your body might need a few days to adjust to the new level before it is ready to increase again. How often should you be thinking of pacing up for a given activity?

■ **Keep records.** This can be time-consuming, but good records help you look back at your achievements and to develop them in the future.

### Increase activity by effective pacing



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If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.