

Pain and Pacing

Some people with persistent pain markedly reduce physical activity because it hurts. Others push through pain and may overdo their activity. This generally flares pain up and the increased activity becomes hard to sustain. Still others overdo when their pain level is relatively low and then stop activity when pain flares. This sets up an unhelpful cycle of rest and overactivity. All of these patterns tend to have the eventual overall effect of reducing an individual's activity. Then within a short space of time muscles tighten, joints stiffen and there are many negative effects on cardiovascular fitness, mood and sense of wellbeing.

Pacing is about **planned physical activity** and doing a **little bit often**. Pacing means finding an achievable amount of physical activity given your current level of fitness and pain. It is not underdoing or overdoing but working at a level between the two.

Background Planning

1. Firstly you need to take **control** by learning about your pain from your doctor or other qualified health provider. You will need to actively work with your health provider to explore new ways to get moving again - despite your pain.
2. Think about the things you enjoy or did enjoy doing and brainstorm ways to **gradually** introduce them into your normal daily routine.
3. There may be limits on what you can do, especially at first, though a well rounded program of exercises should include:
 - a. Activities that keep the body more supple or flexible (stretching). Gently stretch all areas of the body, not just the painful area.
 - b. Exercises that make you stronger like lifting small loads. Other ideas are wall slides or lunges. Having strength to maintain good posture is also worth practicing
 - c. Exercise for the cardiovascular system such as walking, swimming or dancing for example.
4. It is important to start slowly. Your exercise regime needs to be comfortable. Over time, your improved fitness, mobility and posture will gradually counter the effects of disuse.
5. Remember, the gains are entirely up to you. A small amount of regular activity is better than overdoing it and flaring up your pain.

Getting Started

Pacing involves commencing a daily activity routine that is easily achievable. The activity can then be gradually increased by counting number of movements, distance or time. Pacing is most simply applied to walking in the first instance but the principles can be used for any type of physical activity including specific exercises, household tasks, hobbies or work duties. The key steps are as follows:

1. Measure **baseline physical tolerance**. For example, how far can you walk before your level of pain begins to increase significantly?
2. Calculate **regular activity level**. This involves reducing the baseline physical tolerance by 20%. For example, if pain flares after walking 100 metres, then reduce this by 20% to give a **regular activity level** of 80 metres.
3. Devise a daily program. If your **regular activity level** is 80 metres, you could choose to repeat a walk of this distance 2 times daily. The number of repetitions needs to be decided by you. It needs to fit in with your time commitments and energy levels.
4. Gradually increase activity levels. Rate of increase depends on what you are comfortable with. You could choose to increase either walking distance, walking speed or number of repetitions. Walking distance, for example, could be increased by 10% each week.
5. Record progress in a pacing or pain diary and discuss it with those involved in your health care.

Key Message: *Pacing can be used to increase your level of activity and fitness and hence your overall sense of wellbeing.*