

Patient information

## Pacing

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

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Persistent Pain Service

0207 377 7872



## What is pacing?

“Pacing” is a way to achieve more without making your symptoms worse. Pacing is a skill, which helps people to improve their fitness and function. It can be applied to exercise or general activity. Learning how to pace is an important skill to develop. It means breaking tasks down into small, manageable chunks and stopping to relax in between tasks before the pain increases. Learning to do everything in small manageable chunks, from house cleaning to exercise can help reduce pain and lessen the stress of these activities.

## What is the over activity/under activity cycle?

The majority of persistent pain sufferers will keep going at a task until they are forced to stop by pain. They tend to overdo things on a good-pain free days and as a result are unable to do anything much for the next few days due to a flare-up. Feelings of frustration and stress set in as one is unable to do much. When the pain subsides there is the tendency to overdo in an effort to make up for lost time. This then causes another period of increased pain and enforced rest.

### Overactivity is:

- Doing too much
- Doing too many tasks in a short period of time

### Underactivity is:

- Too little activity
- Reducing fitness, muscle strength, endurance

- **It's alright to ask for assistance**  
Start with the easier activities and ask for help with those you can't manage yet.
- **Keep to your targets and plans as much as possible**  
If you are having a good day be careful not to do more than you have planned, to avoid overdoing things. If you are having a bad day try to keep going as you have planned but pace yourself more (take more rest breaks).
- For activities you cannot leave, still attempt to pace yourself. Take short rest breaks as often as possible. Try and change your position regularly. Ask for help

## Benefits of pacing

- Doing more over time
- Taking control of pain
- Having fewer flare-ups
- Less pain, using less medication
- Increased confidence
- Increased muscle strength
- Greater flexibility
- More energy
- Brighter mood
- Improved sleep

## Helpful Pacing tips

- **Take frequent short breaks**

Do something for a set time, then take a short break, then do a bit more, then take another short break and so on. For example, if you can manage 15 minutes in the garden, but then have to lie down for the rest of the day, try working in the garden for five minutes, take 15-30 minutes break, then do another five minutes in the garden. Short frequent “pauses” are often better than one big “stop”!

- **Choose to stop instead of being forced to stop**

- **Pace to time, NOT pain**

- **Change your position regularly**

Staying in the same position for a long time puts strain on your muscles. Change position regularly eg while preparing a meal you could try to change between sitting and standing.

- **Gradually increase the amount**

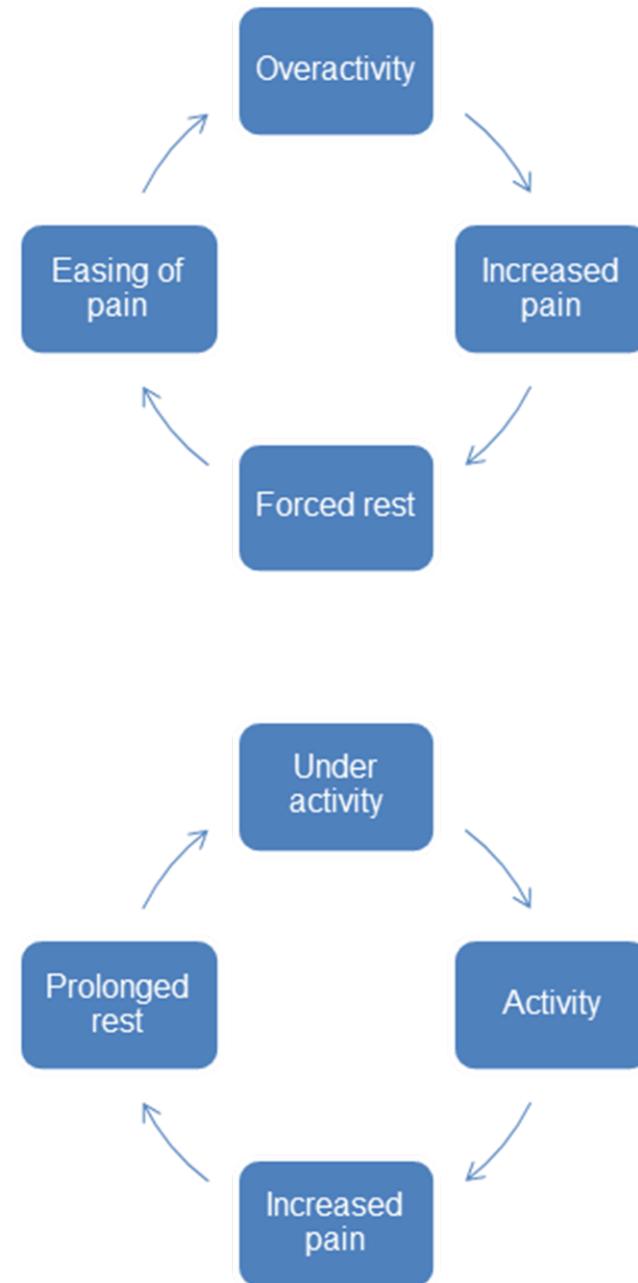
To begin with it might seem like you are going backwards as you are doing less than before. To pace up an activity or exercise you should plan to do a bit more each day or every second day. Each increase should be small and don't do more than you planned.

- **Break up tasks into smaller bits**

If the whole task is too much for you to try in one go, attempt to break the activity up into smaller amounts. For example, divide your grocery shopping into two bags instead of one. Only vacuuming one room at a time instead of attempting to vacuum the entire house.

- **Start on the activities that are easier**

Be prepared to leave those activities that are too hard for now. You can come back to them later as you get fitter. For example start with dusting the house instead of vacuuming.



## Breaking the cycle

The key is stopping **before** the pain increases.

Pacing will break this cycle and ensure that **you stay in control of your pain**. Pacing will make sure you're not trapped in the downward spiralling effect of the pain cycle of excessive rest and over-activity and increased pain.

Pacing is about planning your time to get a good balance of activities throughout the day and the week. You need to space your activities out evenly and not cramp everything into one part of the day or one day of the week.

For the activities you want to increase, you must set yourself small and gradual targets and not overdo it.

The first thing is to work out what your “tolerance” is for each exercise or activity. **Tolerance** is the amount you can easily manage without increasing your symptoms more than you can cope with later in the day or the next.

You start at a ‘**baseline**’ that will probably be less than your tolerance. This is an amount of activity that is not too much, but not so excessively sedentary that you become weaker.

## Guidelines for pacing

- Work out your current baseline
  - Carry out the activity on three separate occasions
  - Time / measure for how long / how far you can do activity before pain increase
  - Work out the average
  - 80% of that is your current baseline
  - OR for activities that are difficult to measure – Whatever you think you can do, start by doing less
- Baseline of activity is what you can manage on a good or not so good day
- It's about doing activity even when you don't feel like it
- And not overdoing it on the good days
- Not underdoing it on difficult days despite pain, low mood etc

### Remember:

- Plan
- Prioritise
- Pace