



Healthy Joint Group: Managing flare ups and pacing

The Healthy Joint Programme is for patients with joint problems caused by osteoarthritis (OA). The group sessions offer expert advice to help you manage your symptoms and live well. This leaflet outlines managing flare ups and pacing.

If you have any questions, please speak to your physiotherapist, who will be happy to help.

What is a flare up?

- A flare up is a temporary increase in symptoms and is common with OA.
- It is an increase in your usual pain and is often called an exacerbation.
- It is often a sign that the joint is irritated either by too much loading or as a part of the changes happening within the joints. It is typically the intensity of the activity rather than the type of activity that causes the flare up.
- It may be a sign that you are not pacing yourself very effectively but sometimes it cannot be linked to a particular activity or action.
- Flare ups are temporary. The pain usually settles down within a few days with appropriate management and should not require you to see your GP.
- A flare up does not mean that the condition is worsening.

Self-management techniques

- Active rest for a couple of days is recommended. This does not mean complete inactivity; it simply means avoiding unnecessary activity until the pain settles.
- Ice can be used to help with pain relief if the joint is swollen or inflamed. Ice and heat can be used for pain relief (see Week 4 leaflet).
- Gentle exercises without weights will allow the joints to keep moving, to maintain strength while the joint settles.
- Use of pain relief medication may help. Should you find your normal pain relief is not effective, then a review by your GP may be a good idea.
- Relaxation techniques may be useful if you are feeling stressed or anxious (see Week 2 leaflet).
- Gradual return to normal activities can be started as the pain starts to settle. It can take a week or so to get back to your previous activity levels. You may need to do fewer repetitions of your exercises initially and then gradually build up to your previous levels prior to the flare up.

Pacing your activity

The vicious cycle of over activity

On good days, overdoing things can lead to an increase in symptoms, including pain, frustration and anxiety. This in turn will lead to a significant drop in activity over the following few days. With this drop-in activity, joint stiffness and muscle weakness increases and stamina decreases, meaning that it will be easier to overdo things when you return to the activity.

Decreased stamina due to prolonged resting and avoiding activity can lead to activities feeling more difficult on the following days.

Pacing out your activities can help break the over and under activity cycle by alternating periods of activity and active rest, allowing you to complete everyday activities without a significant increase in pain.

Effective pacing of your activity allows you to increase your stamina and activity levels without worrying about an increase in pain. This is due to fewer periods of extended rest. Pacing puts you in control of your life rather than your pain and stiffness being in charge.

Pacing yourself allows you to spread out activities more equally, so that you are still able to manage to do the same amount of activity without experiencing increased pain and the subsequent reduction in the level of your activity.

For such pacing to work, you need to:

- Stop an activity before you feel tired, in pain or discomfort.
- Think about how long it usually takes to feel tired or sore and aim to stop the activity before this happens, i.e. shorter bouts of activity broken up with shorter periods of active rest or a different activity.
- Plan and prioritise how to spread different activities through the day and week and balance out strenuous activities with easier activities through the day.
- Balance out static and active activities.
- Rest means a change of activity, e.g. sitting down to do some paperwork after vacuuming. However, care needs to be taken not to sit for too long as this could increase symptoms; therefore, these activities also need pacing.
- Pacing may not be easy at first. It can be difficult to avoid overdoing things, but pacing works better if you are strict with timing rather than trying to carry on with the task to get it finished. Use a timer or alarm clock to time your activity to act as a reminder to stop.
- Gradually increase the time you spend doing your activities as your stamina increases.

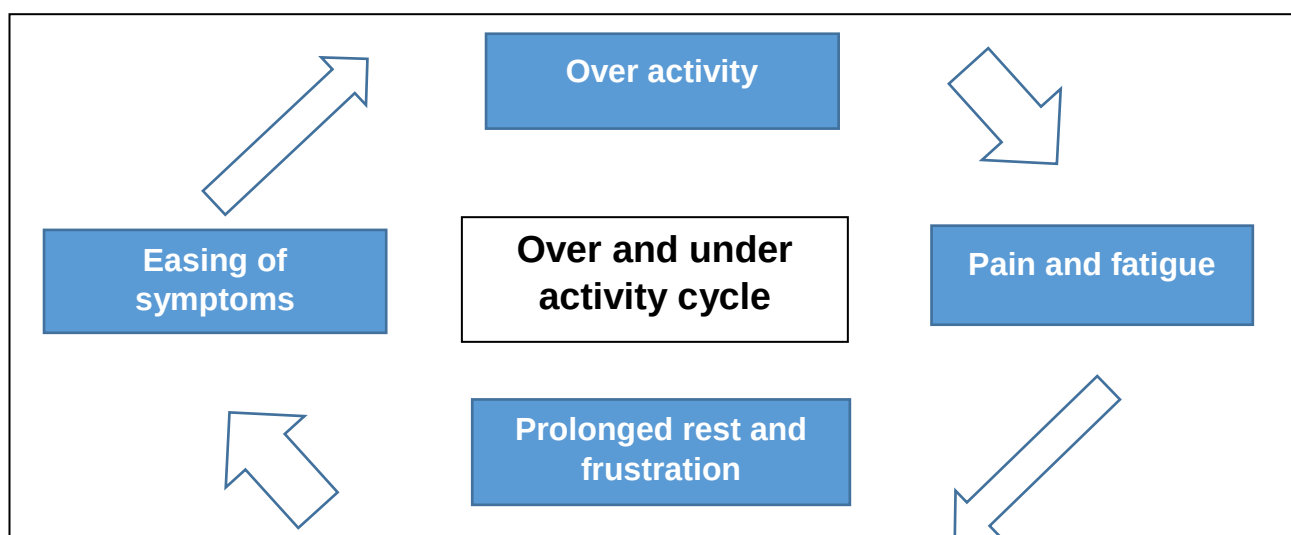


Figure 1: The vicious cycle of over and under activity

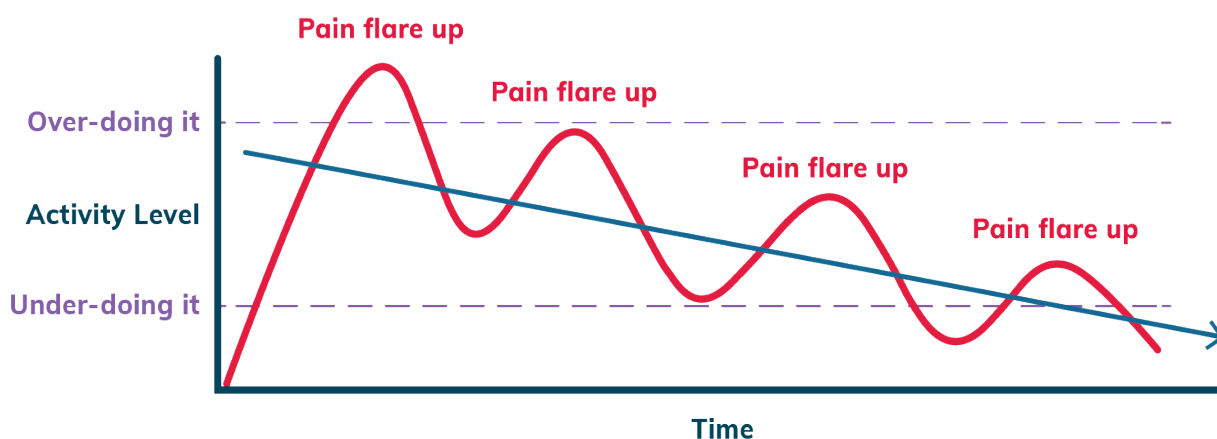


Figure 2: Boom and bust cycle

It is often a sign that the joint is irritated either by too much loading or as a part of the changes happening within the joints. It is typically the intensity of the activity rather than the type of activity that causes the flare up.

Contacting Physiotherapy

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To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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