

## Persistent Pain - Strategies for keeping mobile

### Introduction

Those people who have persistent pain often find that they cannot do as much as before they had the pain. People are affected in different ways:-

- Some cannot walk as far
- Others find carrying, reaching or bending difficult

Long-term effects of doing less may mean that the body loses condition:-

- Muscles become weaker and lose stamina
- Flexibility decreases
- Everyday activities can feel harder

Other changes can occur:-

- Balance and co-ordination can reduce
- People can start to lose confidence in movement

What started out as a problem with pain becomes two problems: pain and loss of fitness.

### What helps maintain mobility?

A number of strategies can help maintain mobility. People who manage best are often those who accept that some changes are needed in the way that they approach activity. This leaflet discusses some of these strategies. A short leaflet cannot cover all what we know about “best management strategies”, but it can act as an introduction to the basic principles.

### What kind of changes can help?

The first change is to fully understand the ‘meaning’ of pain. We are used to pain acting as a warning sign of damage: a cut or a burn, a strain or sprain. These warning signs are helpful. They allow us to avoid further injury, to use ‘first aid’ measures to treat the problem and to seek help when required. These are all examples of new pain or ‘acute’ pain, as it is known to medicine.

‘Persistent’ or ‘ongoing’ pain lasts much longer than body tissues take to heal. If you are reading this leaflet, it means that your doctor does not consider your pain to be a warning sign of damage. We do not think that persistent pain is helpful in the way that acute pain can be. This is not always easy to understand, especially when you suffer with pain. You may like to discuss this further with your doctor if you have any questions about this. The second helpful change is a change to the way in which people rely upon pain to tell them when to stop an activity.

We have all heard the phrase ‘stop if it hurts’, but many people with persistent pain find that an increase in pain can happen after they have stopped an activity; sometimes later that day, or perhaps even on the next day. A common experience is that people will try to do more on a day when the pain is not as bad, but will ‘suffer for it’ later. In other words, pain is often a poor guide to how much we should do at the time.

## How can I judge how much I can do?

Advice that we offer is based upon the experiences of many thousands of people with persistent pain. We can explain the principles, but each individual must learn to use them in their own personal circumstances. If you find these principles difficult to apply, tell your doctor. The Pain Management Service may be able to help you with this. We encourage people to monitor how much of an activity they can manage every day. If someone finds that they can manage the same amount every day (e.g. a 10 minute walk) then that is their 'baseline' for that activity. We understand that pain levels often vary from day to day, but we do not encourage people to do more on a 'better' day as that can lead to a worse one the next day.

## Baseline maths: a worked example for John

Imagine that John, who has arthritis, can walk for 15 minutes one day, 20 minutes the next, and 5 minutes the day after. First of all, John needs to add up the total time he has walked over the three days, and then divide it by 3 (days) to work out an average. Then, John needs to reduce that average to get a "baseline".

In this example:

John's walking times:  $15 + 20 + 5 = 40$  minutes in total.

Average time:  $40 \div 3 = 13.3$  minutes = 13 minutes (always round down to make the maths easier).

## So, what is a sensible baseline for John?

John needs to be sensible about what to aim for over the next few days. If he aims for 13 minutes, he might not achieve it every day. So, we would encourage John to set a lower "baseline" and to aim for a 6 minute walk every day. This might seem like a backward step, but reducing the baseline to 6 minutes will probably guarantee that John will not overdo the walking.

Within a week, he might increase his walking to 7 minutes a day. Once he has achieved that level consistently for a few days, he can increase it further, and so on.

This principle of setting a baseline can be applied to other activities (e.g. gardening, ironing clothes, computer use).

**Following a sensible baseline often helps to stop the pain from flaring up, although a pain flare-up can also be due to:**

- High stress levels
- A simple cold
- An awkward movement
- Coming off medication too quickly
- Or even the weather

## Exercise for people with persistent pain

Exercise can help people to improve their stamina, strength, way they move and their confidence in movement. Exercise does not cure pain but it will help you to move with more ease and be more active. Some people feel that exercise makes the pain worse and so give up. Try again, using the principle of a baseline. Do not give up. Find a different way to exercise and do not overdo it.

## **Starting an exercise programme**

The most common mistake is to overdo the exercises on the first day. Most people over-estimate how fit they are. If you have not exercised for some time, it is not helpful to be guided by how much you used to be able to do. For example, if you used to be able to swim 40 lengths of the pool, but have not swum for a year, how much should you do? The answer differs from person to person, but those who set their sights lowest will be most encouraged. The person who tries the hardest will be most discouraged the day after. When you have tried once, then you can start to set your 'baseline'.

Once you have set your baseline and confidently achieved it for at least three exercise sessions, you can start to think about increasing your exercise level. Increases of about 10% seem to work well for most people. Just because you can manage 5 minutes on an exercise cycle does not mean you can increase to 7 minutes in one go! Try it in steps of half a minute and allow yourself at least three exercise sessions to get used to the increased level before increasing again. Sometimes people reach a 'plateau' when they find they cannot improve. This is normal. It is important to remember that the level you are working at will give you better mobility even if you would like to do more. Sometimes, by adding tiny increases to your exercise level, people can move off a plateau very gently.

## **Some simple home exercises**

Repeating an 'everyday' movement can help to build stamina. Try these movements and set a baseline.

1. Sit-to-stand: Get up from a chair as smoothly as possible, and then slowly sit down again. Repeat.
2. 'Walk on the spot': Lift each leg in turn. Choose how high to lift each leg and how fast to lift them. It is easier to start with a slow, small movement.
3. Step-ups: From the hallway, step up onto the first step with one foot and then the second. Step down again, using the same leg to lead down. Practice some with each leg leading, if you can.
4. Reaching up: Imagine you are reaching for something from a cupboard in front of you. Only reach as high as you can manage smoothly with good control of the movement.