

Low Back Pain Flare Ups & How to Manage Them

Service User Information Leaflet

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What is a Flare Up?

The nature of chronic pain means that there will be times when you experience increased pain and symptoms for longer than 24 hours. These episodes may be referred to as flare-ups, or a setback.

What can Cause a Flare Up?

Poor pacing/Over exertion: Increased or prolonged activity.

Changes in medication.

Stress, Anxiety or depression: Physical and emotional.

Other diseases or infections.

Hormonal changes.

Weather changes: Sensitivity to cold, damp, humidity, heat.

No obvious reason

Don't panic: This is the most important piece of advice.

Most chronic pain patients have flare ups. This does not mean you are “back at square one” or “this is you forever”. It just means you need to do things a bit differently for a few days.

THE QUICKER YOU CAN TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR FLARE UP BY USING YOUR TOOLBOX, THE QUICKER THINGS WILL SETTLE.

Identify Triggers?

This can be difficult to do, but try to identify the “**what's**”, “**where's**” and “**why's**” to prevent a flare up from happening again.

Remember these triggers may be either as the result of poor pacing, over-activity or due to an emotional upset.

The *over-activity/ rest cycle*

Too much activity on a good day can lead to increased pain, enforced rest, probably an increase in pain medications, low mood and as a result less gets done.

Creating and Using Your Toolbox

A toolbox is a collection of self help measures that help you manage your pain.

Here are some suggestions for your toolbox:

- Relative rest.
- Gentle movement.
- Positions of comfort.
- Heat or Ice packs.
- Self massage.
- Pacing activities.

- Relaxation techniques or CDs.
- Distraction: do something you enjoy.
- Medication: It is really important to put some time aside to start thinking about medication, extra above your normal day to day routine as prescribed by your doctor or community pharmacist.

Control your pain with the 3 P's.

Pace: **Forget “no pain no gain”** You must take control and pause before the pain increases or you become tired, and move from static positions before your pain increases.

Plan: a) What **needs** to be done today.
 b) What **could** be done later.

Prioritise: Do one main task a day or break a task into manageable parts e.g. a section of the garden only.

Basic Exercises and Advice.

Your physiotherapist will advise you of any exercises that are suitable for your specific problem prior to discharge.

Take it slowly as your exercises are not supposed to hurt.
Use exercise as part of your daily routine to manage your pain.

Developing an exercise routine is important in the management of your pain. You may be able to manage your pain better by adding exercise at the right level into your daily routine.

There is not a one-size fits all approach to exercise. Each patient is different, with a different set of physical problems. This affects what type of exercise is reasonable.

Guidelines for Flare-up Management.

1. Recognise that you are having a flare up/setback. The earlier you do this the sooner you can take steps to manage the flare up/setback.
2. Seek your G.P's advice if you have had an injury or are concerned that you have a new problem.
3. Reduce activities but keep mobile, i.e. return to initial baselines (starting goal) for exercise/activities.
4. If lying down helps the pain, rest in this position, but practise gentle mobility exercises (e.g. shoulder stretches). Try to walk a little at intervals.
5. Bed rest for longer than 48 to 72 hours is not recommended by current research.

6. Take medication as prescribed. A regular dose is more effective during a setback than waiting until the pain is too much to bear.
7. Try to relax.
8. Gradually start to increase activity, working towards simple achievable goals as soon as possible.

Conclusions

Flare ups/setbacks are an inevitable part of ongoing pain. Hopefully, now you have better skills to manage them. Flare-ups do not damage you. They can slow down your rate of progress. As you learn to pace, plan and prioritise your flare ups should reduce in severity and frequency.

Basic Exercises and Advice

These are just some of the back exercises to help ease your back pain. **Take it slowly at first. These exercises are not supposed to hurt.** Make these exercises a part of your daily routine to control your back pain.



1. **Pelvic Tilt.** Tighten your stomach muscles. Draw your lower abdomen inwards as if your belly button is going back towards the floor. Tilt your pelvis so your tailbone rises from the bed. Ensure you breathe in and out as normal. Hold the tension only in your lower abdomen. Repeat as comfortable.



2. **Heel slides.** Lying on your back. Bend your knee by sliding your heel towards your bottom. Then straighten the leg out again. Repeat as comfortable to both sides. It is important not to lift your leg as this might make your back pain worse.



3. **Knee rolls.** Lying on your back with knees together and bent. Slowly roll your knees from side to side keeping your upper trunk still. Repeat as comfortable to both sides.



4. **Hip Flexion.** Lying on your back, bring one knee up to your chest and hold for 5 seconds. Repeat as comfortable to both sides.



5. **Postural Awareness.** Try not to slump or remain in a prolonged position for extended periods e.g. in front of the TV.

For Further Advice:

www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints