



Practice  
Plus  
Group

# Persistent pain and how to take back control



Information for Guided Patient Management

Provided by

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## The information provided in this leaflet aims to:

- Help you understand and become the expert on managing your pain
- Help alleviate fears you have about pain provoked by activity
- Give you a “toolbox” of skills that will help you stay active and return to previous activity
- Help you become fitter and healthier and in control of your pain

## What is the difference between Acute Pain and Persistent Pain?

**Acute pain** is short-term and tends to be associated with possible damage to your body. For example, if you sprain your ankle it is likely you will feel pain from the immediate injury and subsequent bruising and swelling. The body’s automatic reaction is to protect that part of the body from further damage. As the body part heals and no longer needs protecting, the pain will settle, movement returns and you should return to normal activities. Healing should be complete within three months and definitely in 6 months.

**Persistent pain** is pain that has continued past 6 months and continues even though healing has occurred. When we injure ourselves, our pain system becomes alert ready to interpret the situation and react appropriately. This analysis is influenced by many factors. Most importantly that of previous memory of pain and the associated experience it brought with it. Changes in movement patterns and past debilitating pain, that came with it often causes nerve sensitivity. These thoughts influence our frame of mind and subsequently the nervous system and the brain interprets our pain as a potential threatening situation to the body.

In persistent pain it is understood this sensitivity, of our nerves to interpret messages of pain remain alert, even though the injury has resolved. Persistent pain is less to do with injury in our bodies and more to do with our central nervous system and brain.

## Nerves Brain and Pain Interaction

The brain is really important when it comes to understanding pain. All pain, no matter where or how it is felt, is produced by the brain. In the same way, when a person repeats a particular activity on a regular basis e.g. putting on socks, the brain creates a pattern of nerve connections and so learns the action. If a movement is painful for long enough, the brain then associates this movement with pain, it becomes over sensitised. This is an unhelpful pattern as once the nerves are sensitised, just preparing to do the movement (putting on socks) may be enough for you to feel your pain. The pain system is like the volume knob on the radio, sensing both increasing and diminishing pain sensations. The volume is 'turned up', setting off alarm bells and increasing pain whenever a susceptible movement is made. The volume knob can potentially stay stuck on 'loud', as the nerve impulses are repeatedly alerted, and the result is persistent pain. It is important to understand that you can 'turn the volume down', by actively participating to control the pain and decrease the symptoms that are sensed. If the volume knob is not turned down, persistent pain develops, which can take over a person's life.

## Our perception of pain

Pain = damage?

Hurt = harm?

Everything has healed so why does it still hurt?

At this stage X-rays and scans demonstrate, everything is clear. Possibly natural age related changes and there is no reason for concern. So why does it still hurt? The feeling of pain is a result of nervous impulses and their interpretation by the brain. Any previous injuries or memories of pain, can influence patterns of movement, 'bending' is commonly seen. The signals from the body to the brain become amplified on this activity, alarm bells start ringing and the brain thinks: danger harm is on the way, and so the action is avoided.

Pain is a protective response and can change our normal activities by disturbing body movement, behaviour and mood.

- Avoid activities that may hurt, we start to do less and become less active
- Muscle function changes: timing of muscle action, longer reaction times and changes in sense of balance lead to progressive muscle de-conditioning
- As muscles get weaker, activity becomes more painful and effortful causing further activity avoidance
- This leads to frustration, anger and anxiety as simple tasks cannot be completed, and hence effect our mood
- Natural chemicals released during stress, anxiety or depressions are very similar to the chemicals released when there is a possible threatening situation to the body and so enhance pain.

## Managing Your Pain

Persistent pain is a real-life problem, so effective management needs to take a holistic approach to address multi-factorial areas. Lifestyle, family demands, work issues, past experiences, mental wellbeing. Once you take this on board and understand all the reasons contributing to your pain, you are ready to start your journey, to take control of your pain.

## Returning to activity

- Exercise and movement: this is a scary thought as previously doing any activity may have increased your pain, and it still may. We know pain is not damaging, these are just 'loud' brain signals. Gradually increasing your exercise and pacing your activities, will allow you to feel in control, improve your confidence as well as increase your fitness.
- Pacing: Most people with pain get fitter by slowly increasing the level of activity and setting themselves goals. Sometimes you may try to ignore your pain and push yourself, getting satisfaction from achieving the task but at the cost of being in pain. Pacing is a skill which will help you become more active, achieve your goals and feel more satisfied. The key is to do little and often.
- Goal Setting: This will involve planning; actively make a step by step plan to achieve the goal. For example; walking to school to collect a child or grandchild. If the goal is to walk 15 minutes, the distance walked has to be gradually increased over a realistic period of time. The body needs time to adjust to the muscular effort required. Pain impulses need graded exposure to alter and regulate this effort to be normal. The process of pacing and goal achievement are interlinked. Decide on your goal priority and use your life skills to make a step by step plan.
- Positive mood change: It is also known when we exercise, on a regular basis endorphins are released which combine with receptors in the body to block pain and reduce the perception of pain. These also create a 'feel good factor' a positive mood change, which increases your confidence to do more activity. The negative cycle of low mood, depression, lack of activity and pain can be reversed.

## Tool kit to take back control

1. Understanding persistent pain: and to realise you are in control and have the ability to turn the 'volume down'.
2. Goal setting: set yourself realistic achievable goals, to gain the 'feel good factor', through a step by step plan.
3. Pacing: Doing little and often is the key to achieving goals. Keeping your effort levels at a constant of 3/10 and avoiding setbacks.
4. Managing mood: making a conscious effort to taking a positive response to a situation. This will not change the situation but alter your behaviour, body signals and outcome.
5. Relaxation and mindfulness: Breathing mindfully is the best way to relax. Deep diaphragm breathing reduces physical tension and manages your stress. Mindfulness takes your thoughts away from yourself/pain, and allows you to engage solely into the activity you are doing, as the brain cannot do two things at once, you cannot read and watch TV at the same time. This should become a part of your daily routine, to help prevent the build-up of tension.
6. Sleep: a good night's sleep is essential for healing. At night our bodies restore and repair our muscles and tissues, enabling recharge of energy levels, ready for the next day's activities. Being in pain can make getting a good night's sleep difficult causing daytime sleepiness, irritable moods, less motivation and less ability to cope with daily difficulties.
7. Managing flare ups: Recognising the signs that your pain has been aggravated is important and managing the flare up with appropriate medication before the chronic cycle of pain sets in. This enables your pain to settle and allows you to return to being active, and benefitting from all the advantages it brings with it.

Taking control primarily changes your focus away from pain, increasing your body activity and achieving meaningful goals. This allows better social functioning, to start living a full life and returns the joys of life once again.



