



Managing Flare-ups

What are flare-ups?

When we have a persistent pain problem it is common to experience flare-ups. A flare-up is usually characterized by a sustained increase in symptoms. They often have triggers—these can be physical, negative thoughts and feelings, or life events. Remember that these triggers are often not immediately obvious. There may be situations that make the flare-ups more likely. There is often a vicious cycle that maintains this flare-up. If you can identify your triggers you can reduce the likelihood of a flare-up. You therefore may be able to break this vicious cycle and manage these situations better. As a result you may find that flare-ups become less problematic, you can manage them better, they don't last as long and you can get back on track much sooner.

How do I respond to a flare-up?

When symptoms become really bad it is difficult to do anything else but dwell on them – this is natural but can get in the way of recovering quickly from a flare-up. How we respond to that increase in pain and what we think about it will often influence how quickly we recover from a flare-up. If we think the worst when we experience a flare-up and reduce our activity levels it can often take a long time to recover. However, if we view flare-ups as a normal part of a pain problem, and are reassured that it is safe to get moving, we often recover much quicker. Remember that flare-ups are usually time limited, so whilst you may need to reduce your activity for a short while, it is important to gradually increase activity in a short period of time.

Flare-up Emergency Plan

- Keep calm, it will get better
- Assess whether this is a new pain or your familiar one

- Use relaxation principles (eg breathing exercises) and do some gentle exercises
- Take it slower for a few hours
- Keep active, but be prepared to modify activities
- Begin to build physical activities up gradually
- Take your usual analgesic medication if it helps
- Aim to keep in control of your recovery
- Reflect on what might have triggered the flare-up in order to learn from it
- Congratulate yourself afterwards for managing it well

Managing triggers

Initially there may be a trigger which causes a setback. We may have an excessively busy day which we weren't expecting, or we may forget to take our medication, or we may receive some bad news about something. As a result of this our pain can often increase. We may be able to control some of these triggers. For example a common trigger for back pain is sustained sitting. By taking regular breaks from sitting, by getting up and stretching, we can reduce the chance of a setback from happening. Other techniques to reduce the chances of setbacks from happening include doing exercises, going for a walk, changing to another activity, or doing relaxation exercises. However, in spite of employing these techniques there will be times when setbacks cannot be avoided. Setbacks are not always triggered by particular activities and not all triggered pain is controllable. However, through applying the techniques recommended in the setback emergency plan, the impact of setbacks can be reduced.