

# Pacing – a really useful skill for people with pain

Every time I try to get fitter I overdo it and end up feeling even worse

My pain and stiffness stop me from even starting to become more active

I find it difficult just to do the everyday things like going upstairs, cooking or doing the washing

I used to be able to run 3k and I should be able to but I can't, so it isn't worth doing any exercise at all.

People living with persistent pain find that *pacing* is one of the key everyday skills to learn and use.

In this leaflet you will find out what pacing means and discover the benefits of balancing activities through the day.

Pacing can help you achieve your goals without increasing your pain or letting tiredness force you to stop.

As you'll see, pacing is like the story of the tortoise and hare: slow and steady wins the race.



## How can pacing help in managing persistent pain?

Pacing involves regulating your exercise and daily activity so as not to flare-up your pain and to gradually increase what you are able to do. Pacing helps you to become more active, fitter and healthier.

Pacing is about choosing when to take a break from an activity – before pain, tiredness or other symptoms become too much. In other words, not carrying on until pain forces you to stop.

Here are some of the positive changes that people with pain noticed after they learnt the skills of pacing:

### Doing more

They could do more over time, either by themselves or with family and friends. They could tick more things off their 'to-do' list.

### Sleeping better

They could sleep better at night.

### More control

They felt they had more control over the pain and their activity levels.

### Less medication

They depended less on medications and thus experienced fewer unpleasant side effects.

### Brighter moods

Life became more enjoyable – they had more fun.

### More energy

They felt stronger and more energetic – they had more 'get up and go'.

### A better social life

With more confidence that their pain was manageable, they could plan for a better social life and do more things with family and friends.

### Less pain

They found they had less pain and had fewer setbacks, which didn't last long.

### Less effort

They felt less effort was required to achieve daily tasks and activities.

## Unhelpful pacing

Whether we know it or not, we all do some kind of pacing – it just might not be the best kind for us.

Generally speaking, there are three unhelpful styles that people with persistent pain often use: overactive, underactive and 'boom and bust'. As you read about unhelpful pacing styles below, decide which pacing style you currently use:

### Overactive pacing

This means doing too much activity or too many tasks over a short space of time.

Typically, this happens if you are having a good day, with less pain, or your mood is better: you try to do too much and end up with more pain and tiredness. This means you miss out on enjoyable things because you have to take time out to recover.

### Underactive pacing

Underactive pacing means that you are doing too little activity to help keep up your strength, stamina and flexibility in your muscles, ligaments, joints and bones.

Most of your time is spent resting, sitting or lying down, which is understandable, especially if there is a lack of fitness makes muscles and other tissues tight, weak and painful.

However, this can actually add to your pain, so over time you end up doing less and less because of the pain.

### 'Boom and bust' pacing

Often people use pain and energy levels as a guide to their activities and pacing them. This means they risk doing too much activity on good days (overactive), which makes their pain worse. They are then forced to rest while the pain settles down (underactive).

This is a mixed style of pacing, which is unhelpful in the long term. It's sometimes known as 'boom and bust'.

Whether you feel that you tend towards being an overactive pacer, an underactive pacer, or a 'boom and bust' type of pacer, then the good news is there's lots you can do to change your pacing style.

## Tools and resources that can help you to pace well

There are different ways to make some changes to your pacing style. Here are some suggestions to try.

### 1. Activity Diary

To learn how to pace well, it's important to understand what your pacing style is now. A good way to do this is to track your activities with an *Activity Diary*.

#### How to do it

Fill in the Activity Diary for at least two days. To do this you will need to:

- shade in the boxes for the hours when you were asleep
- fill in what you were doing and for how many minutes each time
- write down when you took a break, sat down or lay down, and for how long

#### What to do next

When you have completed your Activity Diary, what do you notice about your pacing style? Use these questions to guide your thinking and write down your answers:

**How much activity did you do each day?  
(in hours or minutes)**

**How much time did you spend resting, sitting or lying down each day?  
(in hours or minutes)**

**How many hours were you asleep each day?  
(in hours or minutes)**

**Did you manage to do the things you needed to do?  
If yes which ones?**

**How much effort did your activities take on a scale of 0 to 10?**

**Do you think your current pacing style is mainly underactive, or overactive, or a mixture of both styles?**

**My activity diary**

Use this in conjunction with Pacing – a really useful skill for people with pain from My Live Well with Pain

 [www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk](http://www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk)

Time	Activity	How many minutes did you do?
8am	Shower Got dressed Made me and Anne some breakfast	10 5 20
9am	Washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen	25
10am	Sat with Anne and had a coffee and a chat Sat in kitchen and wrote a shopping list	45 15

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You can draw up your own *Activity Diary* on a sheet of paper – or download a ready-made one from:

[www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources/booklets-and-leaflets/pacing](http://www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources/booklets-and-leaflets/pacing)



## 4. Balanced thinking

Helpful pacing also needs balanced thinking that helps you to balance the time spent on an activity with rest periods or breaks. This thinking helps you keep up the activities which you value and are part of the goals that you want to achieve. It is a really tricky skill to learn and use, yet makes a positive difference to being more active, to your sleep and even to the pain itself.

To help develop balanced thinking, try to be aware of:

### 1. Thoughts like ‘must’ or ‘should’

Replace these with ‘could’. For example, instead of thinking ‘*I must get it all done today*’, try thinking ‘*I could choose to pace, and do it in stages over two or more days.*’

### 2. Thinking that all the jobs must get done today

Watch for the unrealistic ‘all or nothing’ thinking styles that are not helpful. It is not giving in, except to pain!

## More useful tips for becoming a good pacer

These tips are from other people with pain who have learnt to pace:

### Use a timer

Time your activities and stop using pain and tiredness as your guide. For example, some people use a timer on their mobile phones or a kitchen timer so that the alarm goes off to tell them it’s time for a break.

### Prioritise and plan

Think about what needs doing today, tomorrow and next week. People with pain often realise that the way they think about activities is unhelpful. Thoughts like ‘I must get this all done now’ lead to an overactive pacing style. Rather than thinking ‘This must be done within the next day or so’, try thinking ‘I might get all this done this week.’

### Use an ‘effort level scale’

Get the effort level right and build in rest periods; for example, have a refreshing drink, listen to music, do breathing activities, talk with a friend or colleague.

### Aim for balance

Making the rest period enjoyable means you are more likely to put in a break and look forward to it.

### Set goals

Everything is achievable given the right tools and length of time to complete the task. Set short- and long-term goals.

### Involve others

Let them know what you are doing and why, get them to lend a hand, have some fun and plan to give yourself – and them – a reward.

## Summary

- Pacing is a key daily skill to improve all parts of your life. Identifying your pacing style and making changes helps you to find ways to balance activities and build in breaks.
- Over time pacing can help you do and achieve more with fewer setbacks.
- If you are underactive, steadily pace yourself towards more activity. If you are overactive, you need to plan and use more rest times and relaxation.
- Priorities are a vital part of pacing skills. Aim to plan each day's activities around what is important to achieve.
- Explore the effort and speed that you need to perform your activities, using the effort scale as a guide. Adjust levels to ensure you pace in a balanced way.
- Experiment with a regular Daily Plan to find a balance between activities and rest or relaxation breaks, and be prepared to fine-tune your pacing.



For lots more tips and resources to help you live well despite your persistent pain go to:

[www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk](http://www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk)

*My Live Well with Pain* has been created by a group of clinicians who specialise in working with people with persistent pain. After many years of working with people with pain, they have recognised that one of the keys to living well with pain is **self-management**.

When people self-manage their pain, their quality of life improves. Eventually it stops dominating their day and they begin to get more out of life.

*My Live Well with Pain* is a collection of resources that are designed to help you learn the skills you need to become an effective self-manager of your pain.

By using the resources in this website – and with support from your GP or pain specialist – you will be able to learn how to do this too.

Use them wisely – and share what you learn with your pain specialist, and other supportive people around you. They'll be able to give you more encouragement, so that your journey is a successful one and you can truly live well with pain. Good luck!