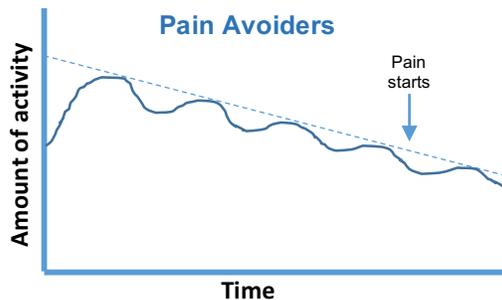


Activity pacing

Are you a pain avoider or a boom-buster?

What do you normally do when the pain starts? Do you stop at the first sign, or do you push through until you can't bear it anymore?

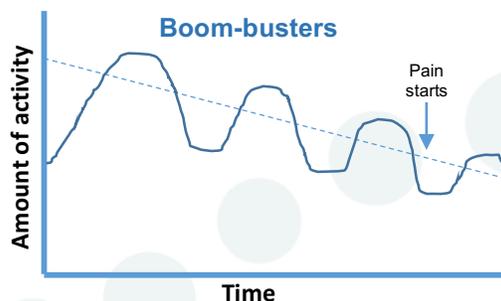
If your natural response is to stop the task when pain starts, you're a pain avoider.



Many pain avoiders are concerned that they will damage their body if they push through the pain.

However, pain avoiding doesn't work over the long term.

If you're a boom-buster, you ignore the pain and keep going until it is unbearable. Once the pain has flared up, you can take days or weeks to recover. When the pain has settled, you start the cycle again.



Boom-busters are often perfectionists, high achievers and/or those that have difficulty sitting still.

Boom-busting doesn't work over the long term either.

Using either approach, the pain gradually starts to kick in sooner and sooner during the activity and what you can do gradually reduces.

Over time it becomes harder and harder to complete daily activities – those you need to do and activities you want to do. It impacts on your work and home jobs, spending quality time with family and friends, and joining in social and recreation activities.

The amount of pain determines what you can do - at this point pain is in control.

The good news is that there are options to increase activity without flaring up your pain. Over time you can become stronger, fitter and feel more in control. This means you can do more of the things you need and want to do.

Activity pacing is a practical way to do more without causing flare-ups. It is about doing little bits often and gradually increasing what you can achieve. Start low and increase slowly.

How to get started

1. Understand your pain

Work with your health professional to understand what is causing your pain. Different types of pain need a slightly different approach to pacing.

2. Set a goal

Work out what activities you need to do and those that you want to do. Then pick out one or two tasks that are achievable and important to you.

Example: To be able to walk to the park and back (25 minutes).

Start with the easier activities and come back to the hard ones later.

3. Work out your baseline

Figure out how much of the activity you can do now without a pain flare. You could measure this using time, distance or number of repetitions.

Example: I can currently walk to the end of the block and back before my pain flares up (10 minutes).

Then start from just below this – around 20 per cent less – to give yourself a buffer for days when the pain is bad.

Example: Walk for four minutes along my block, then turn and walk four minutes home (Total of eight minutes).

4. Repeat the task daily

Complete your baseline level of activity each day for a week. Stop once you have completed the planned amount. Even if you're feeling good, don't push on – remember the boom-bust cycle.

It can be helpful to use an alarm (clock, mobile device, family/friends) to ensure that you stop when you reach the agreed amount of activity.

Keep in mind that it is normal to have some increase in pain after an activity. Increased pain lasting for an hour or so is a common response to exercise, and is not a pain flare.

What you don't want is to have your pain increasing more after each exercise session.

5. Gradually build up your activity level

Increase your activity level a small amount each week – around 10 per cent works for a lot of people. This small increase allows your body to adjust to the new level without a flare up. By increasing time, distance or number of repetitions, you will move away from letting pain be your guide.

Example: Week two - Walk for 4.5 minutes along my block, then turn and walk 4.5 minutes home (Total of nine minutes).

Helpful tips

- Write your plan down, and record how much you are doing.
- Try to keep to your plan on good days and bad:
 - On good days, don't do more than you had planned.
 - On bad days, try to keep to the plan but take more rest breaks.
 - If you have a flare-up or illness, reduce your activity to a level you can cope with, add rest breaks, and slowly pace up again.
- Use pacing principles for activities you can't avoid and take frequent short rest breaks. This is particularly important for stressful or demanding activities.
- Taking a break does not mean that you always need to sit or lie down - alternate between heavier and light tasks, stressful and less stressful activities, or change your body position or posture.
- Pacing is a way to improve what you can do in the long term. You may need to ask for help with specific tasks, especially while you are building up your tolerance.
- During hot/cold/rainy weather you may choose to modify your chosen activity. You could change the time of day, or the location (eg. take a walk at the shopping centre, instead of along the street).

Activity pacing sounds simple, but it is challenging to put into practice. In the short term you will need to plan your day more, and it can be helpful to have someone who supports you to pace when the going gets tough.

Over time you will see positive changes occurring and with persistence you will be able to do more of the things that are important to you, with less flare ups.

Sources:

- Butler et al (2013). Explain Pain (2nd Ed.) Noigroup Publications: China.
- Nicholas et al (2011). Manage Your Pain (3rd Ed.) Harper Collins: Australia.
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