

FLARE UPS

Flare-ups are periods of increased pain often experienced by people who live with ongoing chronic pain. Sometimes it's hard to know what triggers a flare-up, especially because there are usually a number of factors involved. Sometimes you can prevent a flare-up, but other times you can't.

Flare-ups usually happen when either our pain increases or there are changes in how well we are dealing with pain. When the sympathetic nervous system gets wound up, pain gets worse. There are four main factors involved in a pain flare-up:

- Behavioural factors – i.e. our actions, behaviours
- Physiological factors – i.e. biology, genetics, physical factors, our physiology
- Emotional factors – i.e. feelings, moods, emotions
- Cognitive factors – i.e. thoughts, beliefs, self-talk

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN FLARE-UPS HAPPEN?

- **Take action as early as possible.** While you usually can't stop a flare-up once it has started, you can shorten its duration or make it less intense. Taking charge of your flare-up gives you back some control.
- **Avoid 'high risk' situations.** If possible, avoid situations you know are likely to make it difficult to cope with pain, increase your pain unnecessarily, or will prevent you from using your regular coping and pain management strategies.
- **Watch for early warning signs.** Try to notice the early warning signs in your body that indicate a flare-up is starting. Think about what you can do differently in the moment to take care of yourself.
- **Take positive "first steps."** The aim of taking "first steps" is to give you some breathing space so you can think more clearly. Stop. Practice calming breathing techniques by inhaling and tensing, then exhaling and relaxing.
- **Do something to change your physical situation.** Stretch, change positions, change your task, slow down, take a walk, practice walking meditation, try massage, or apply ice or heat.
- **Focus on relaxation.** Try to counteract feelings of stress by focusing on relaxation techniques like breathing or meditation.
- **Distract yourself.** Meeting up with a friend may not be possible, but there are other ways you can distract yourself to get through a flare-up. This might not change the pain but it can help

you cope better. Focus on free, simple activities. For example, go for a gentle walk, re-read a book, watch a comedy, do a crossword, or play Angry Birds!

- **Ask for help.** You may need the distraction of hanging out with friends, or you may need practical help from a medical professional. Make sure you have more than one person you can contact for help during a flare-up.
- **Use your medication properly.** If analgesics are a part of your pain self-management plan, you should take them exactly as prescribed. Underuse or overuse will likely not result in the benefits you may expect. However, stronger medications can be useful in the short term for a flare-up. You may wish to consult with your doctor about your options if your regular medication isn't helping you manage pain during a flare-up.

RESOURCES

- <https://www.liveplanbe.ca/pain-education/flare-ups/controlling-flare-ups>
- <https://www.wsh.nhs.uk/CMS-Documents/Patient-leaflets/PainService/6290-1h-Chronic-pain-self-management-managing-a-flare-up-of-pain.pdf>
- <http://www.action-on-pain.co.uk/you-and-chronic-pain/plan-for-flare-ups/>