

MOVEMENT AND PACING FOR CHRONIC PAIN

Movement is one of the most common recommendations given for people living with pain, this is because movement is medicine. For many people living with pain, it can be incredibly challenging to start moving again. Fear of re-injury, pain levels, fatigue and motivation can all be roadblocks to moving again. However, just like finding the right medication, finding the right type and amount of movement that works for you can take time. Any activity that gets you moving can help manage pain, whether it's dancing to music, cleaning the house, walking the dog, or other forms of movement. The following information and resources may help you overcome these challenges and incorporate more movement into your wellness plan.

MOVEMENT, PAIN AND THE BRAIN

Chronic pain can distort the brain's danger or warning signals, so movement may feel unsafe even when it is not (for more information about the science of pain, [click here](#)). Pain gets in the way of movement and exercise when we respond to in any of the following ways: stopping moving ("underdo"), moving differently ("tensing up"), or moving excessively ("overdo"). Living with chronic pain, you will most likely recognize yourself as falling within one of the following categories:

- **Avoidant** ("underdo") (i.e., "I'm overly cautious of causing a pain flare-up so I avoid or minimize certain movements and activities. Even when I do move, at the first sign of pain, I stop the activity.")
- **Boom and Bust / Pushing** ("overdo") (i.e., "I won't let pain stop me living my life, so I push through the pain, and then have to deal with a serious pain flare-up during the following days.")

Whether you're someone who tends to "overdo" or "underdo" movement, the result is the same: **movement becomes increasingly difficult and your capacity to do certain activities without pain decreases.** This is because when we respond to pain by either, "avoiding" or "pushing through", the outcome reinforces that movement is unsafe. For example, when you avoid or minimize movement when you start to feel a twinge of pain, that reinforces that movement is unsafe. Likewise, when you "overdo" it, you are more likely to experience pain flare-ups from doing too much which reaffirms the brain's assumption that you are not safe when moving. Through the gradual reintroduction of movement, including short or imagined practice sessions, you can rebuild strength, flexibility, confidence, and retrain your nervous system to recognize that movement can be safe.

BUILDING SAFETY IN MOVEMENT

You can begin to build safety and capacity in your nervous system for movement, even when it hurts, by using the following strategies:

- **Find your baseline**, which is the right amount of activity you can do without increasing pain, being conservative at first (it may be helpful to write down your observations for future reference).
- **Move to the "edge"** of pain or the sensation of muscular stretch/fatigue.
- **Stop if you move into your pain threshold.** It is important to stop if any movement is extending past your pain threshold.
- **Maintain calm** and even breathing, keep body tension low, and monitor pain without reacting negatively.
- **Ease off** if you are not feeling safe or feel like you will "pay for it later."
- **Challenge yourself and build slowly.** Increasing your movement by a few minutes or 5–10% more per week is sufficient!

Re-introducing movement takes patience, consistency, and self-kindness. Small, gradual steps help break the fear cycle and improve long-term capacity.

PACING

'Pacing' means to achieve and maintain a relatively even level of activity energy throughout the day, even though you may naturally want to try and keep up with your family and friends or community. Pacing is not all about stopping the activities you enjoy. With trial and error, pacing will allow you to find out how much activity your body can handle before pain begins to increase. Through practice and overtime, we can begin increase our overall tolerance for activity and get back to doing more, with less pain. Learning how to pace takes time, and during that time, flare-ups can happen as we test our limits.

You can begin to utilize pacing, by starting with the following:

- **Track your daily energy and make mindful choices to avoid overdoing it.** By planning ahead, you can avoid overdoing it and thereby helps your body and nervous system feel safe.
- **Use a pacing chart to plan activities.** The key to pacing is to determine how long you can do an activity before you trigger a flare-up and plan to do slightly less than that amount (*i.e., if gardening triggers pain after 20 minutes, set an alarm to stop at 15 minutes, take a short break*

(stretching, culturally meaningful movement, or a relaxation activity) then continue for another 15 minutes). It's better to break up your movements throughout the day rather than to do them in one longer session (for example, walk for 10-minutes three times per day instead of walking 30 minutes at once).

- **Rest periods are essential to pacing.** When you are planning your day's activities, you should always include rest periods. Resting can include meditating, reading, watching TV, or talking to a friend.
- **Gradually increase capacity** by a few minutes each week, building confidence and strength safely.

OVERCOMING MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL BARRIERS

Along with physical challenges, it is common for people to feel self-conscious about their weight, disability, illness, or injury, and want to avoid working out in public places. Some people find that they're fearful about falling or injuring themselves. You can work to overcome these mental and emotional barriers by:

- Focus on what you can do, rather than what you can't do.
- Concentrate on finding activities that you ENJOY!
- Reward yourself for effort and trying new activities.
- Be prepared to try new or modified exercises if there are activities you used to do that are not possible at this point. You might even be able to continue activities you enjoyed before in a modified way.
- Exercise with friends, family, or in groups if that helps motivation.
- Write down your reasons for exercising and/or a list of goals and post them somewhere visible.
- Expect ups and downs and understand it is normal to skip days and return without guilt.

GETTING STARTED

- Start with an activity you enjoy and keep your pace and your goals manageable. Remember, exercise is not 'one-size-fits-all'; you have to figure out what works best for you.
- Integrate movement into daily life in a way that works for you (it can be helpful to write down your plan for movement in a schedule or track your movement in a diary).
- Use short practice sessions or mental rehearsal to help your brain learn that movement is safe.

- Build slowly by adding a few minutes or a small percentage increase each week.
- Stick with it! It takes a few weeks to transform a new activity into a habit.

RESOURCES

- [Pain Support Line](#): 1-833-261-7246
- Coaching for Health: painbc.ca/coaching
- Gentle Movement @ Home: painbc.ca/find-help/gentle-movement-at-home
- Mindful Hand Drumming @ Home: painbc.ca/mindful-hand-drumming-at-home
- Movement by LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/movement
- Building a Flare Up Plan LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/building-a-flare-up-plan
- Nervous System Regulation LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/nervous-system-regulation
- Pain Support and Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- Making Sense of Pain: Online: painbc.ca/msop
- Power Over Pain Portal, Movement: portal.poweroverpain.ca/resources?terms%5B%5D=30®ions%5B%5D=42&sort=random
- Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute (TAPMI), Physical Activity: tapmipain.ca/patient/managing-my-pain/pain-u-online/physical-activity.html
- Change Pain, MSP Virtual Groups: changepain.ca/services/msp-virtual-group-medical-visits
- Pain Recovery, MSP Group Medical Visits: painrecovery.ca
- Vancouver Coastal Health, Arthritis Education: Register for free online classes to help you manage your arthritis: vch.ca/en/health-topics/arthritis-education#short-description--20446
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Finding a Physiotherapist to Manage Chronic Pain: painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-12/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Finding%20a%20Physiotherapist%20-%20Final.pdf
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Finding an Occupational Therapist to Manage Chronic Pain: painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-12/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Finding%20an%20Occupational%20Therapist%20-%20Final.pdf
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Activities of Daily Living for Chronic Pain: painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-12/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Activities%20of%20Daily%20Living%20and%20Chronic%20Pain%20-%20Final%20%281%29.pdf

- Managing Pain Before and After Surgery: paincanada.ca/course/managing
- Empowered Relief®: paincanada.ca/resources/empowered-relief
- Pain BC, Find Help Directory: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/directory
- LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca
- Pathways, Community Service Directory: pathwaysbc.ca/community
- Self-Management BC: selfmanagementbc.ca

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