

# Statewide Persistent Pain Management Network



## Persistent Pain Education Series

### Your Guide to Managing Flare Ups

A flare-up is when your pain increases significantly from its baseline or normal level. This can negatively impact on your ability to function and do your daily activities. **Once pain has persisted for months or years, it cannot be used to measure the real state of your tissues.** It is common for it to go up and down, the Pain Clinic health team is here to teach you how to keep it more down than up!

### I didn't do anything differently, why has my pain flared?

**Many different factors can lead to a flare up.** Movements, places, something someone has said to you, stress. It may be difficult to identify what caused the flare up because there may have been more than one thing that caused it. There can also be a delay between the trigger and the increase in pain.

### Should I go and get a scan to see what's changed?

In most cases **the answer is no.** Unless you have had a traumatic incident (e.g. a car accident, a fall) OR you have other concerning symptoms, you won't need a scan. In a surprisingly large number of cases, what is seen on a scan doesn't match what your symptoms are. You may get an x-ray or MRI report that lists all sorts of nasty sounding things which were in fact there **before** you had pain, and don't need fixing. So, **you don't need to freak out over a flare up** but if you are concerned, see your trusted GP or your Pain Clinic team as your first port of call.

### How do avoid a flare up?

With careful observation or **an activity diary**, you may start to recognise what your flare up triggers are. Have a look at the list of potential flare up triggers below. Are any familiar?

- Body triggers: a new minor injury, a change in medications.
- Environmental triggers: a sudden change in the weather, going back to the same workplace that you first had your injury.
- Social: your grandmother tells you that she had the same pain as you and it never got better.
- Emotional triggers: stress, anxiety (thoughts are nerve impulses as well!)



So, you can see that there can easily be a few things which lead to a flare up. If you feel your pain has flared for seemingly no reason then this generally points to an over-reactive nervous system as the main pain 'driver', rather than a specific structure like a ligament or a disc. These tissues will usually only react under physical load.



## What should I do during a flare-up?

A flare up doesn't mean you are back at square one.

Some actions you can take during a flare-up:

- **See your GP or trusted health professional** if you are concerned. It is unlikely that a trip to emergency will be helpful. Go to someone who is familiar with your pain. If it is after hours and you can't see your usual health care team you can call 13HEALTH or an afterhours GP.
- **Continue to use pacing** when you do any activity. Keep up gentle activity. Avoid complete rest. Even when your pain is above its baseline, keep on doing the little things; get out of bed at the normal time, have a warm shower and eat normally.
- **Reflect on the last time you had a flare up.** It wasn't fun, but it did pass with time. Focus on the important things in life.
- **Breathing and relaxation** techniques can help to dampen down your pain system.
- **Continue to take pain medications as prescribed.** Or importantly talk to your GP if you feel they aren't helping, or no longer needed. Medications for pain are changing and your response to them changes, so keep up the communication.
- If you think the flare up was from a particular movement or activity, **talk to your Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist.**
- **Stay positive.** It is easy to think negative thoughts such as 'I can't deal with this'. This can contribute to making the pain experience worse. Instead think, 'I will get through this' or 'this won't last forever'. And if you know exactly why your pain flared (you went to that concert you had booked tickets for ages ago)- then **perhaps it was worth it!**



## Additional resources

**Read** <https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au/pain-module/pacing-and-goal-setting/>

**Watch** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DorpArmOBz0>

**Listen** <http://www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/long-term-conditions/chronic-pain/coping-flare>