



GUIDE

Occupational Therapy

Pain Management for Activity



The Ottawa | L'Hôpital
Hospital d'Ottawa

Disclaimer

This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health-care provider. Please consult your health-care provider who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.

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What is pain?

Pain is an unpleasant sensation produced when the body is under threat. There are two categories of pain: acute pain and persistent or chronic pain.

While in hospital, you may be experiencing pain related to your condition. There are many causes, including:

- post-surgery pain
- stiffness, joint pain
- pressure on specific body parts leading to pain
- abnormal sensation
- muscle tightness
- persistent pain you have experienced for a long time

What can I do to help my pain?

The health-care team will work with you to manage your pain. The team wants you to function well, and to resume your activities of daily living. Treatments while you are in hospital may include:

- using and timing your medication properly to manage pain
- understanding and treating the causes of your pain
- exploring strategies to manage the pain

In this booklet and with your occupational therapist (OT), you will explore useful strategies such as:

1. Positioning for comfort.
2. Reducing pressure on specific body parts.
3. Assisting with pacing and grading activity.
4. Dealing with worry and anxiety.
5. Returning to everyday tasks.

OT: Positioning for Comfort

How can I get more comfortable when I have pain?

To help you position comfortably, specialized cushions or pillows can be provided for physical support. These may be used in a chair, in bed, in your car and/or during community activities. It is important to have a variety of positions you find comfortable. Change positions frequently!

Your OT suggests:

OT: Reducing the Pressure

How can I reduce pressure on my body? In bed? In a chair?

It is important that you avoid too much pressure on your body in any one area. When you stay in one position for longer than 30 minutes you risk causing more pain from increased pressure. Frequently changing your position will help. Trying surfaces for support provided by your OT, such as foam, air, or gel, reduces pressure on body parts.

Your OT suggests:

OT: Assisting with Pacing and Graded Activity

I want to start getting ready to return to activity, but how?

You must manage your pain levels whether you experience acute or chronic pain. It is important that you do not overdo activity and experience excessive pain. However, if you continue your daily tasks, you will improve your quality of life and you will remain active. OT will guide you to find ways you can resume the daily tasks that are important to you. For example, OT might help you to plan an activity with adequate rests during and/or after.

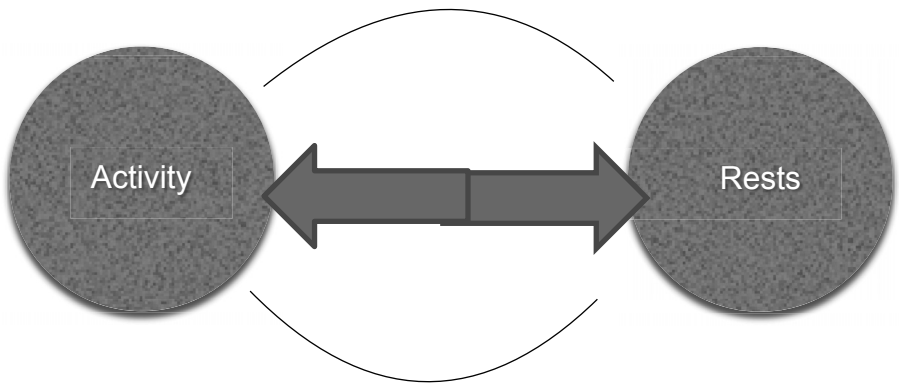


Figure 1: Remember to balance activity with rests

You will also want to gradually increase the length of time (duration) and the effort (intensity) of your activity. A rule of thumb to guide you is to increase either length of time, or effort, by 10 % every three to five days spent in the activity. For example, the time you spend doing an activity may gradually increase from 20 minutes to 25 minutes, throughout one week.

Your OT suggests:

If you overdo your activity and this results in **chronic** or **persistent pain**, your activity habit may look like this:

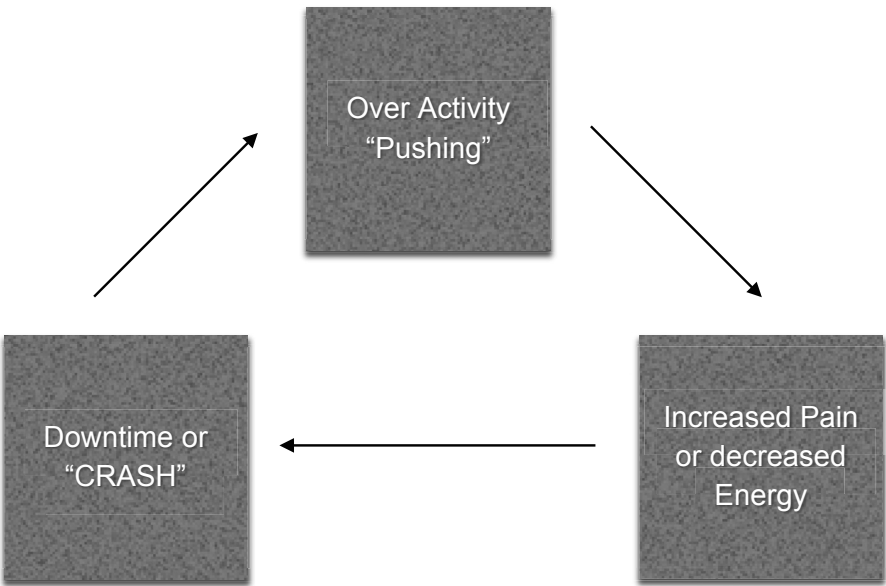


Figure 2: Pain Cycle: adapted from Steger, 1989

If you are in the cycle of chronic pain you may try to do things the same way you did before the onset of pain. Sometimes you may push yourself beyond your physical abilities to get things done, especially on your “good days”. You end up in a flare up of pain as a result and can do much less the next day.

You can pace each activity with adequate rests and stop the Pain Cycle. By rating your pain on a regular basis, you will become more aware of your pain. The following is a rating scale that you can use:

Circle the one number that best describes your pain on average:

(no pain)

(pain as bad as you can imagine)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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When you have persistent pain, it is advisable to stop or change activities before the pain level goes up by one or two points from your baseline. By doing this you will be managing your pain throughout the day. Pain and energy levels will be more predictable. Over time, your body will be able to recuperate more efficiently and you may be able to gradually increase activity.

It is useful for you to plan your activities over a week to balance rest and activities.

Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			

Saturday			
Sunday			

Your OT suggests:

OT: Dealing with Worry and Anxiety

I want to return to activity, but I worry about the pain!

Returning to activity may cause you anxiety, especially if you worry about having more pain. You may not know you are anxious. The body’s response to anxiety worsens pain. Pain can increase feelings and sensations. Negative or worry thoughts, irritability, sadness, tense muscles, restlessness, and headaches are known to contribute to higher levels of pain.

Here are four steps to dealing with worry:

- 1. Know your body’s signs of increasing anxiety.
- 2. Manage your mind and body responses to anxiety and pain quickly.
- 3. Use relaxation and mindfulness techniques to decrease overall levels of anxiety.
- 4. Practice positive thinking habits.

1. Know your body's signs:

Pay attention to signs that your anxiety or your pain level is getting higher:

- Changes in your body (sweating, faster heart rate, quick breaths)
- Changes in your thoughts (negative thinking, suicidal thinking)
- Changes in your feelings (angry, down, sad)
- Changes in your behaviours (more alcohol use, not sleeping)
- Changes in your relationships (isolating, lashing out at others)
- Changes in your mood (indifference, loss of meaning or purpose)
- Increase in pain rating on a scale from 0 to 10

Three signs that my pain is getting higher are:

_____, _____, _____

2. Manage your anxiety:

- ✓ Deepen your breathing
- ✓ Relax your muscles
- ✓ Manage negative thoughts

3. Use relaxation and mindfulness techniques: (speak with your Occupational Therapist for further information and resources)

- ✓ Progressive muscle relaxation
- ✓ Visualization
- ✓ Meditation
- ✓ Mindfulness

One relaxation activity I will try every day is:

4. Practice positive thinking habits

- ✓ Journal about what you are grateful for
- ✓ Count your blessings
- ✓ Seek out pleasant activities and socialization
- ✓ Help others
- ✓ Smile

One positive thing I can say to myself is:

OT: Helping You Return to Everyday Tasks

What does it mean to make a plan, prioritize and practice my activities?

Making a plan is always useful when you are trying to make a change or achieve a goal.

A plan can:

- ✓ serve as a memory tool
- ✓ assist you to communicate with others who may support you

A plan is:

- ✓ a good way to prevent over-doing activities or doing too little
- ✓ best if it is somewhat flexible

A pain plan follows healthy routines and includes:

- ✓ exercising or physical activity that relieves mind and muscle tension
- ✓ eating regular and nutritious meals
- ✓ going to sleep and waking up at the same time
- ✓ following your medication schedule

You will need to be aware of setting priorities when you choose activities. The 4 D's of prioritizing include:

- a) Defer it – Can this activity be done at another time that would be better for you?
- b) Delegate it – Is there another person who would be better suited to do this activity or parts of it?

Note: if you **Delegate** you should **Disappear**. Use this time to do something for you. You will need to give up control of the activity or parts of the activity that you delegate, accepting that it may not be done exactly the way that you would like it to be done.

- c) Delete it – Can this activity be removed from your list completely?
- d) Do it – Do you want to do it or need to do it?

“I will remind myself not to let the things I can’t do interfere with what I can do”.

Final notes to yourself

Returning to activity is a sign that you are managing your pain, and learning ways to cope. Remember that if you avoid activity for pain, you risk losing independence and lowering your quality of life. It is rewarding to be more active and you worked hard getting to this point. Consider the following important questions as you increase your valued activities and routines:

What are the most important activities I want to do?

Am I using the best body positions during activity?

Is there equipment to help me to do this activity and do I need help obtaining it?

Which strategies help me continue with the activity? For example, breathing exercises, stress management, limiting the time I spend doing the activity, delegating?

How will I ensure I continue with these helpful strategies?

When do I schedule activity and rests to create balance and lower the chance of a pain increase?

What will I do while returning to my activities to increase my chance of success?

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