

Managing flare-ups of chronic pain

What is a 'flare-up'?

A flare-up refers to a period of intense pain which is felt more severely than your day-to-day chronic pain.

Flare-ups may last hours, days or weeks and often there is no set pattern to them. They often come on quickly and without much warning, so they can be worrying and difficult to cope with.

This leaflet contains information which can help to manage flare-ups of pain.

Contact information

Pain Management Team
Chelsea and Westminster Hospital
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SW10 9NH

T: 020 3315 8000

Notes

Resources

- **Pain Concern**
W: www.painconcern.org.uk
- **Action on pain**
W: www.action-on-pain.co.uk
- **British Pain Society**
W: www.britishpainsociety.org

Patient Advice & Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have concerns or wish to give feedback about services, your care or treatment, you can contact the PALS office on the Ground Floor of the hospital just behind the main reception.

Alternatively, you can send us your comments or suggestions on one of our comment cards, available at the PALS office, or on a feedback form on our website www.chelwest.nhs.uk/pals.

We value your opinion and invite you to provide us with feedback.

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Speak to your clinician

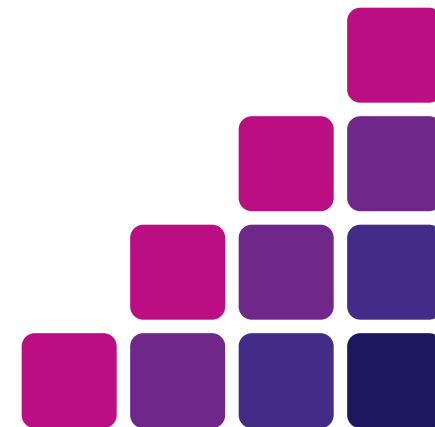


Chelsea and Westminster Hospital **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Pain management:

Managing flare-ups of chronic pain

Information for patients



Why do flare-ups happen?

Flare-ups are a common experience for people who live with long term pain. If you have chronic pain and you experience a flare-up it is unlikely that there may be a new cause for this increased pain.

MRIs and X-rays

Regularly repeating imaging such as X-rays and MRIs for a long term pain condition will not necessarily help. MRI images do not often show any changes for people with long term pain.

If you're at all concerned about your pain or experience new pain then please visit your GP.

Remember chronic pain is always managed as an outpatient (ie pain you have had for more than 3 months).

Advice for you to prevent flare-ups

Can you think of anything that you have done in the last 3 days that may have triggered or increased your pain levels (for example, moving a wardrobe)?

In the past, have you noticed anything or an activity that has frequently produced an increase in your pain (these are often called warning signs)?

Can you think of anything (such as medications, exercise, stretches etc) that has helped in the past so you could use these in the future if your chronic pain flare-ups?

Managing flare-ups

Helpful hints for during a flare-up of chronic pain:

Bed rest and exercise

- Avoid long periods of rest/inactivity. Move regularly in small amounts if possible.
- Consider breaking up your activities (or pacing them) by timing how long you can sit, stand, lie or walk and then stop these activities before you get to your maximum time. Activity is good, not bad! Rather than highs and lows of activity, try and keep a constant level of activity.
- During a flare-up don't over rest during the day or try to sleep through the pain as this really effects night time sleep. A good night's sleep is extremely important.

Pain relief

- Check if you are taking all of your prescribed medicine regularly at the correct dose. Many medications for long term pain need to be taken regularly, unlike paracetamol, which many people take occasionally.

Note: The dose of some medications used in pain management need to be slowly increased before patients notice whether or not they are helping reduce their chronic pain.

- Check you haven't run out of pain relief. If so, seek further prescriptions from your GP and ask about a repeat prescription service. Don't wait for pain relief to run out before booking an appointment with your GP for more!
- Try taking regular paracetamol (1,000mg, 4 times daily) and ibuprofen (if not contraindicated—check with your GP—400mg, 3 times daily).

Note: Make sure you don't already take medication which includes paracetamol and/or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs—check with your GP if you're unsure.

TENS and heat/ice therapy

- Consider trialling a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machine. You can purchase this from most chemists. These are generally safe and offer a different non-medicine approach to helping manage your pain.
- Try using heat and/or ice on painful areas.

Mood and thoughts

- A flare-up of pain can trigger unhelpful thoughts such as 'this is awful', 'I can't cope', 'I am back at the beginning'. You can learn strategies, including cognitive restructuring and meditation, which can help you to manage these thinking patterns and perhaps help you to recognise things that triggered the flare-up.
- Anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders are particularly common with patients who suffer flare-ups of chronic pain. If you notice any signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression then please visit your GP to discuss this further.
- Create a flare-up box which you go to during a flare-up (eg favourite photos, DVDs, books, music) as a way of distracting yourself when you feel overwhelmed by increased pain. This really can help.

Further information to help

- The weather can actually affect chronic pain and trigger a flare-up, in particular certain rheumatic conditions. Don't be alarmed that pain can increase with cold weather or decrease during periods of warm weather.
- Check online—perhaps someone else has written something useful that may distract or help manage long term pain.
- Are you under the care of an outpatient pain management service? If not, ask your GP to consider a referral.