

The Pain Management Programme: How to set a baseline



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How to Set a Baseline

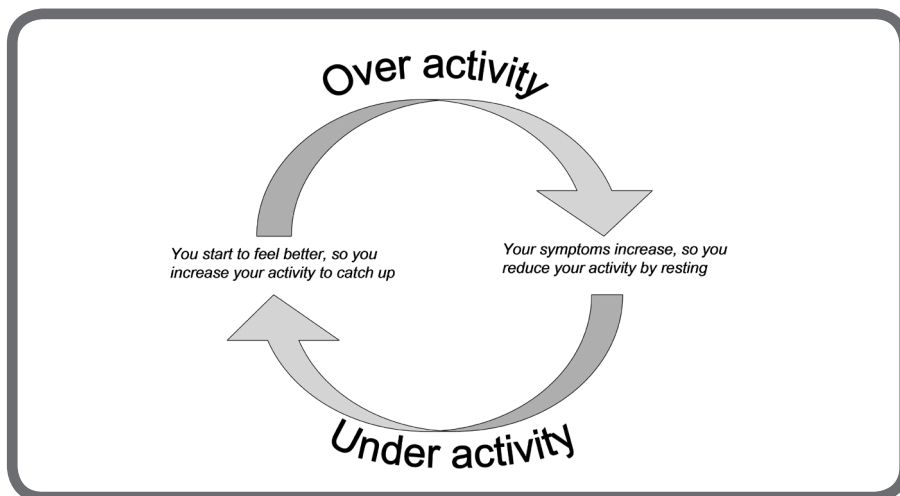
Knowing when to stop

When living with persistent pain, it is often difficult to know when to stop doing an activity or exercise. The pain often varies from day to day and sometimes from hour to hour. The pain can worsen later in the day or the next day following an activity. For these reasons and others, how the pain feels “here and now” is usually an unreliable way of deciding when to stop an activity or change position.

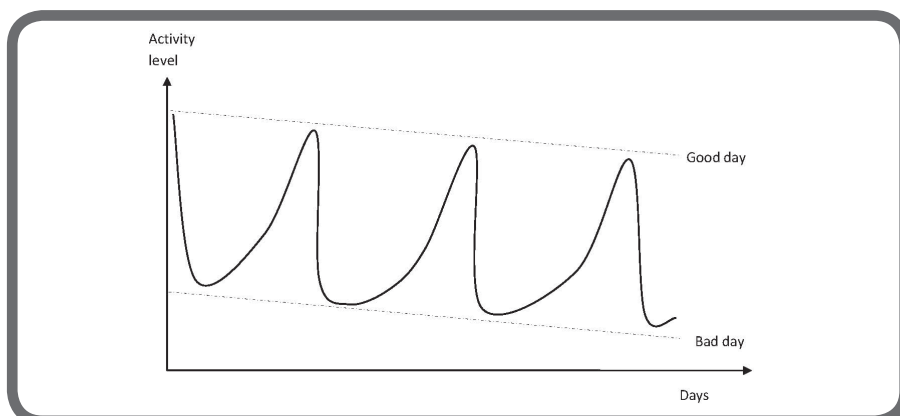
People sometimes follow one of these two “rules” to guide them when to stop:

- **“Fighting it”** means carrying on until the pain becomes so severe, they have to stop. This can lead to “boom and bust” patterns (activity cycling) and can make flare-ups of pain more common.
- **“Listening to my body”** means watching out for a gradual increase in symptoms and using these as warning signs. This approach however, can still lead to problems and people will often overdo activity when they are ‘feeling better’. It also means paying more attention to the pain, which can be unhelpful.

Both strategies rely on using pain or other bodily symptoms as a guide to know how much to do. Using pain as a guide can lead to a cycle of better days and worse days, which we call the 'Activity Cycle' shown below:



The 'Activity Cycle' can lead to having more bad days than better days, and over time this pattern of activity can make it more difficult to get back to a previous level of activity. The graph below shows how this might look: it can look (and feel like) a roller-coaster.



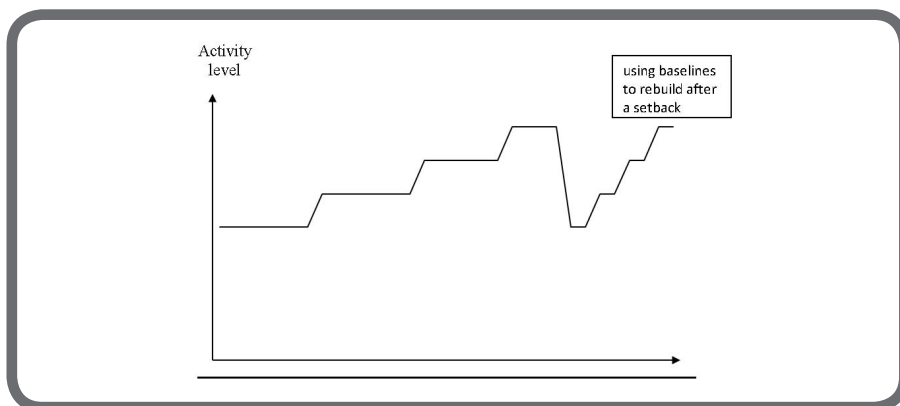
As pain levels “in the moment” can be unreliable as a guide to when to stop, other guidelines are necessary in order to achieve success.

Setting a baseline: learning about your current ability

A **baseline** is a level of activity that is **sustainable** on a regular basis and reflects a person’s **current ability** at that stage. It is an amount of activity that can be achieved daily and is therefore **consistent**.

Using a baseline allows a person to be confident that the baseline amount is manageable and will not lead to further activity cycling. It is especially helpful for any new activity or exercise, or a current activity that is proving to be problematic.

A **baseline** is set at the lower level of **current ability**, serving as a foundation from which to build upon. This can form the basis of future goal setting. The graph below shows how a baseline can be built up over time. It also shows a “setback” or “flareup” and how using a baseline can help to rebuild activity after a setback.



Different ways to set a baseline

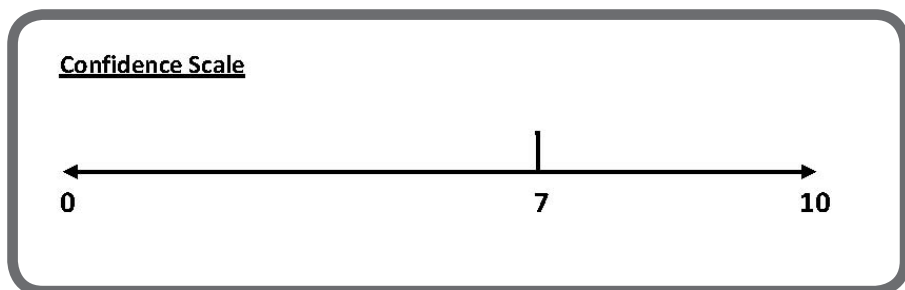
Using a Confidence Scale

Many people find that thinking about their confidence with a task or exercise can be a helpful way of judging the level of activity that is manageable for them individually. The confidence level is based on a 0-10 scale, which is shown below.

Using the scale, you can ask yourself:

“How confident do I feel about managing that level of activity every single day?”

Confidence Scale



Below 7 = level of activity may be too high?

7 or over = more likely to be successful

Example - Geoff wants to build a walking programme into his daily routine. The only trouble is the amount varies from day to day dependent upon his level of pain at the time. One day he can do 20 minutes, another day 5, and sometimes none at all. He is not sure what his current ability of walking is and therefore does not know when he is overdoing this activity. One way of approaching this dilemma is to establish how confident he feels to do an amount **every day of the week**.

Geoff feels he is only “2 out of 10” confident that he could achieve 20 minutes every day. He feels “4 out of 10” confident that he could do 10 minutes. He feels 8 out of 10 confident that he could do 5 minutes every day. As this is over 7, it is likely to be successful. And so he starts with a baseline of 5 minutes daily. He finds that he can manage with this level and after 2 weeks feels “8 out of 10” confident that he could increase this to 6 minutes successfully.

Geoff set a foundation on which to build up on over time and has confidence in the levels that he is doing. Six months later, Geoff achieves a 20 minute walk daily and is pleased with the result.

Other ways set your baseline

People have used the options below with success:

■ Past experiences

You can look back and think about whether there is a tendency to overdo an activity in the past, leading to worse days. Or you may recognise previous experiences have been successful. Recognising a past tendency to start at too high a level may purposefully guide you to start lower.

■ Percentage rule

If you know you have a tendency to overdo a new activity by starting at a level that is too high, you can deliberately reduce the amount to begin with. So rather than start at a usual level you can lower it by 25% or 50%. For example, if someone knows the last time they tried to start swimming, 30 minutes was too high, they may decide to do half that amount and start on 15 minutes.

Some key points to remember about organising your activity levels are:

1. Consider the general landscape of your week. Knowing what you have planned for the whole week is important. Use a weekly planning diary if this helps.
2. The baseline amount of activity and your confidence level are always calculated by what you think you can do on a **daily basis**, not just on what you can do on a “good day”. This way you won’t be trying to do your “personal best” once a week. Instead of your “personal best” you will set up a helpful routine that will allow you to build up gradually over time.
3. It may be tempting to do much more than your baseline on a ‘better day’. However, you may do well to remind yourself of the pitfall of the ‘activity cycle’ before going ahead with a plan which is much above your baseline.

Using baselines for exercise and activities that are proving troublesome can be a useful way of being able to start managing pain more effectively. By doing this, people often find that they can do more as a result, partly because the worse days become less frequent. Setting baselines will help you to make personal decisions about the level of activity at this moment in time: this allows you to clearly communicate your abilities to others. Finally, baseline setting is the cornerstone of your future goal planning.

NHS Constitution. Information on your rights and responsibilities. Available at www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/constitution

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If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.

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