



**Wirral University
Teaching Hospital**
NHS Foundation Trust

What is a Flare Up?

Patient Information Leaflet

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When you live with persistent pain you are probably used to having good and bad days. Occasionally you may experience a sudden and significant increase in your symptoms; this is known as a flare up. These are a common occurrence for those who have persistent pain. They can last anywhere between hours and weeks. It is however important to remember that they always settle to your normal level of symptoms and we can influence the duration and degree of impact they have. The way you manage your flare up has a major effect on how you manage your pain in general.

It is important to develop a strategy that works in managing your flares and your general chronic pain symptoms.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF A FLARE-UP

- Increased pain
- Spread of pain
- Neural-numbness/pins & needles
- Brain fog
- Fatigue
- Low mood
- Cramps
- Feeling withdrawn
- Feeling out of control
- Poor sleep

People commonly feel a mix of emotions during a flare up. For many it leads to feelings of frustration or sadness as an increase in pain can make you feel like you have taken a step backwards. For others it can lead to feelings of fear and anxiety, not knowing why or for how long it will last. People often convince themselves that something must be wrong or damaged.

It is useful to identify how a flare up affects you personally. The earlier you can identify the signs the earlier you can take action to minimise its impact upon yourself. Common early warning signs are increased stiffness, poor quality of sleep, trouble concentrating or increased irritability.

Take time to think what your early warning signs and flare symptoms are and record them below.

MY FLARE UP SYMPTOMS

WHAT CAUSES A FLARE-UP

This is unique to every individual. You may be able to identify specific triggers for yourself, knowing what these are will help you manage them differently. Do not try and avoid these potential triggers as this will result in you withdrawing from many life events and will make you more sensitive to completing them in the future. Instead make reasonable adjustments so you can continue to do everything, even if they are modified.

Make a list of your known triggers and how you might manage them differently to minimise a flare.

TRIGGER	ADJUSTMENT
Example: Walking the dog	Example: pacing, planning, slowly build up physical fitness

It is impossible to know all the triggers and predict when or why all flares occurs. The reason for this is because there are many factors that influence pain. Such as:

- Psychological factors-stress, anxiety, mood...
- Environmental factors-weather, temperature, lighting, noise levels.....
- Health-feeling under the weather, hormonal.....

Try to avoid over analysing the reasons behind an unknown flare-up as this will contribute to your mental fatigue, which is often already challenged during this period.

For a better understanding of the complicated science behind chronic pain watch these short videos on U-tube

Explain pain in 5 minutes https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3phB93rvI

Tame the Beast <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikUzvSph7Z4>

HOW MIGHT A FLARE IMPACT YOU

A flare impacts people in different ways. They can influence people's ability to work, time spent with friends and family, and reduces independence. Some of the common negative effects are:

- Mood- the frustration and unpredictable nature of a flare often lowers people mood.
- Feeling out of control.
- Feeling withdrawn, low confidence and poor concentration.
- Increased need to rest.
- Cancelling and modifying plans

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR FLARE?

At the start of a flare it is important to rest. Even if you've got something to do, it is important to take a break before you use other helpful strategies, listed below.

There are many strategies you can use to help manage the symptoms of a flare. Often it is hard to think straight during this time so having a prepared plan makes it easier and more likely to stick to. Ensure everything on your list has been practiced, trying something new is not the right time when in a flare. Write down your plan so it is accessible to you when you need it. You may wish to share this with someone who supports you.

The following strategies are those known to work for many:

- **Communication-** Telling someone that you're experiencing a flare up and what you'll need from them (this might be practical help, talking or asking them to give you some space). Also talking to certain people that lift your spirits.
- **Follow the 3 Ps!** Prioritise, pace & postpone non-essential activities.
- **Formal relaxation & meditation:** There is lots of scientific evidence that shows mindfulness, breathing exercises and meditation really help calm the central nervous system, which plays an important role in your flare. You will need to find and practice ones that help you beforehand.
- **Relaxed & Calm Environment:** You might need to find somewhere that is quiet. You may enjoy listening to music and using relaxing fragrance or aromatherapy scents.
- **Comfort:** This is the time to be kind to yourself do things that make you feel safe, relaxed and calm.
- **Movement:** Ensure that you move gently every 20-30 minutes. Exercises should be reduced but not stopped. Modify them to the level you can manage.
- **Endorphins – Activate your body's own natural pain killer:** happiness and laughter as well as exercise help release endorphins. Find something that makes you smile and keep moving gently where possible.
- **Modify but do not cancel plans.** Withdrawing from social events may feel the right thing to do but this contributes to low mood. Modify plans instead of cancelling.
- **Distraction** -doing an activity that pulls your attention away from the pain; e.g., hobbies, reading, listening to favourite music, puzzles, throwing a ball, typing, solitaire, games....
- **Thermal-** use heat or cold, for example a warm bath or Ice
- **TENS** machine
- **Self-assuring** statements to remind yourself that this is a normal part of chronic pain and that you will get through it.
- **Repeat inspirational positive affirmations**
- **Check in with yourself after an hour:** How are you doing? Repeat the above.

MY FLARE MANAGEMENT PLAN

ACTIVITY	HOW I'LL DO IT

WHAT TO DO AFTER THE FLARE SETTLES?

After your flare-up, it is quite useful to review why it occurred and how you coped with it. Your review plan could consist of:

- What led to the flare-up? Was it over doing an activity? What can you learn from this?
- Which coping strategy worked best for you during the flare-up?
- Recognise that you managed to use the skills learnt to cope with the flare-up
- Acknowledge that it was a difficult time and give yourself credit for how you coped
- Work out how next time you can decrease the chances of another set-back
- Were your thoughts during the time positive or negative and were these helpful or unhelpful.
- Use the space below to create your own flare up plan. Update this regularly as you learn new techniques to help manage your pain and your understanding of persistent pain grows.

MEDICATION

Please discuss flare up medication plan with your consultant.

EXAMPLE FLARE MANAGEMENT PLAN

<u>ACTIVITY</u>	<u>HOW I'LL DO IT</u>
Acknowledged that a flare up is starting.	Being aware of my symptoms and trying not to push through it.
Reassure myself	"I can cope with this as I have coped before" Remind myself this is difficult but normal part of having chronic pain and that I will manage this" "There are a few strategies I have at home that I know help"
Tell someone	Tell husband. Ask work colleagues to take over a role
Follow THE 3 Ps: Pace, plan, prioritise.	Cut my normal activity by 50% as this helps manage the sensitive nervous system. Plan my day carefully so I don't feel too overwhelmed. Prioritise: are there things I can leave for today and do another time?
Relax	Take the time to relax for 30 mins – meditation, TV, sitting outside, lying down.
Breathing exercises	Breathing in for 5 seconds and out for 7 seconds.
Gentle Stretches/yoga	Every 30 mins or so, try to make small movements.
Aromatherapy	Use oils to aid relaxation. Even use lavender oil in a bath.
Check in with myself	How am I feeling now? Repeat the above.
Mindfulness	Belly breathing Use u-tube script

This leaflet is available in large print, Braille and on tape. Please contact 0151 604 7289 if calling from outside the Hospital and x2761 if calling from inside the Hospital.



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