

Pacing your physical activity

This leaflet explains how to pace your physical activity. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to your occupational therapist.

What is pacing?

Pacing is planning your day so that you do not cram too much in. It helps you spread your tasks evenly throughout the day and plan in time to rest.

Why do I have good days and bad days?

Many people find their energy levels come and go. Sometimes people find they have to rest for two to three days following an activity, or find the task leaves them absolutely exhausted. If this happens to you, you may find this information sheet helpful.

Why should I pace my physical activity?

You become fitter from doing some activity every day, rather than lots on one day, and barely any on the following days. Remember that you lose fitness twice as quickly as you gain it.

A lot of people fall into the following trap:

- They have a task to do, for example digging the garden.
- They wait until they are having a 'good' day.
- They do much more work than usual.
- For the next couple of days they have less energy or are exhausted and have to rest.

The result is the rest undoes all the benefits of the work and a bit more, and they become less fit than they were before. When they start doing things again, breathlessness comes on more quickly than before. They think their condition is getting worse but really they are just less fit.

What is the overactivity-rest cycle?

If you find that when you overdo an activity you need to spend a period of time resting and recovering, but then follow this by doing too much again, this is known as the **overactivity-rest cycle**.

Why is it a problem?

If this goes on for weeks, it only takes a little exercise to bring on fatigue or breathlessness.

How can pacing help?

You can increase any activity by pacing – work out how much of each activity you can do at a ‘fairly easy’ level. This must be a level that means you do not have to rest the next day. If you find that you do, you are back in the overactivity-rest cycle.

Try to practise at this level if possible every day for a week. When you are finding that level easy, you can increase your level of activity a little.

What else can I do to avoid the overactivity-rest cycle?

- **Plan the things you have to do so that you do not get exhausted and have to rest.** For example, if you have to dig the garden, work out how much you can do ‘fairly easily’ – 10 minutes digging and half an hour weeding, perhaps. Do that amount, **no more no less**, each day until the job is finished. This way, you will get stronger, not weaker.
- **Stick to the plan.** Unless you are ill, do what you planned, even if you do not really feel like it. For example, your plan may be to do the garden for an hour each day. You may wake up feeling a bit tired, but if you choose to wait until tomorrow and do two hours, you will be back in the overactivity-rest cycle. This way leads to more fatigue and breathlessness. If you get started, you will probably find that the tiredness goes and you get your hour done. You will be fitter and, in the long run, you will have more energy.
- **Exercise every day** and build it up so that you get fitter and can do more before having to rest. If you use your walking plan to get fitter, building up slowly so that you do not get into the overactivity-rest cycle, you will be able to do more of any job at once. This can make life a lot less frustrating.

What if I don’t like leaving tasks unfinished?

If you are still feeling OK, it is difficult to make yourself stop. The motto has to be **do what you planned – not what you feel like**. Few of us like to have these limits. They can seem unfair when other people can do as much as they want. This can seem very frustrating, but remember – many people who were very limited by fatigue or breathlessness are able to get back to a normal life once they get out of the overactivity-rest cycle.

Contact us

For further information about any of the issues raised in this leaflet, please contact:

- **Occupational Therapy** on 020 7188 4180, Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm, or
- **Cardiovascular Rehabilitation Team** on 020 7188 0946, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

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