

# Pacing and Setting Goals

## ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



Pacing is a vital skill that can help you manage your symptoms. If you find that you do more than usual on a good day, or if you find it hard to say “no” when asked for help, you may benefit from improving your pacing skills.

Most people with arthritis find that they have good and bad days. On days where symptoms are less noticeable, you may try to get a lot done to make up for your more painful, less active days. This can mean overdoing it on the good days, but can lead to more pain and fatigue afterwards. This often results in having to spend hours or even days doing very little, in order to recover.

Clinicians call this “Boom and Bust” activity. Resting in the “Bust” phase can improve pain temporarily, but the pain may return if you overdo it again. Additionally, too much rest can cause the muscles to weaken and the joints to stiffen, so the amount of activity that you can perform before your symptoms return may also decrease. One of the most important ways of avoiding boom and bust is to pace ourselves better - especially on the good days.

Pacing means setting small but achievable goals and dividing the task into small chunks. This could mean vacuuming one room at a time with breaks in between, or doing a small amount of ironing, then resting and changing to a new job. It is vital that you don’t do too much and that you set achievable goals for yourself.

Try to plan your activities realistically and allow enough time for tasks. This will give you more control and reduce your stress levels. By being more aware of the activities that worsen symptoms and building up your activities very slowly, many people are able to reverse this process, increasing their joint mobility and decreasing the pain they feel. Building up slowly will also increase your energy levels and enable you to do a bit more when you are not feeling so well. You will have to start slowly and be patient with yourself. Don't get annoyed when you have the odd setback, as this is very common.

The key to success is to be kind to yourself, keep your goals realistic, and don't give up!

## Planning is the Key

Below are some examples of how you might pace your current activities. Try them all and use the ones that work best for you:

- Make a list or plan of what you would like to do in a day. Be realistic. Setting yourself easy goals is vital because if you aim for goals that are too hard then you may not succeed, which can be demoralising.
- If you find it difficult to make a daily plan, just make a plan for the next hour or so before any big activity.
- Decide which jobs are most important and put off anything which is not essential, or which is too big a task for one day. Temporarily say "no" to any jobs from others that are not essential that day.
- Divide up your jobs into small chunks, such as a small amount of gardening, or vacuuming one room of a house at a time. Include rest periods between tasks in your plan
- Make sure that your daily plan includes some exercise. Exercise is vital for keeping joints flexible, improving muscle strength and function, and reducing your pain and fatigue. Pick an activity that you enjoy so you keep it up. Start very slowly if you have not exercised for some time. Remember that getting ready for exercise, including getting changed, also takes energy, so include this as part of your exercise goal.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help if you are having a less good day.
- Make a plan for what you will do on a less good day. This might include cutting back on some of your activities, or having additional pain relief. Make sure that you still do some exercise, however small, as this is vital to keep your muscles strong. See our factsheet on 'Flare-up Planning' to learn more.

Stick to your plan, especially if you are feeling well. One of the most difficult but important things to practice is to resist doing more than you planned if you feel well. The aim with pacing is to be aware and to stop your activities before you have to.

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