Persistent Pain Booklet

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Physiotherapy Service

What is pain?

Understanding pain can be very complicated and frustrating particular for individuals who have been suffering from long term pain.

In general pain can be sub-divided into two categories

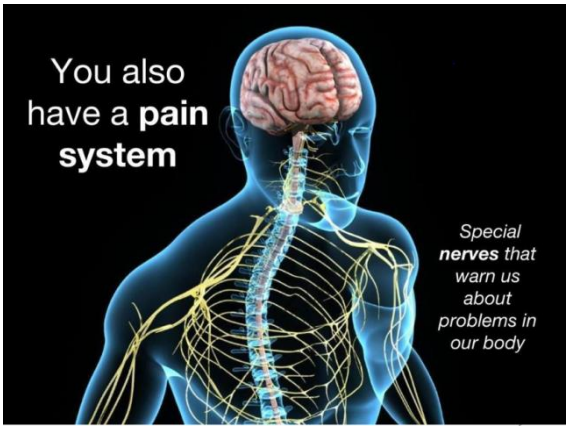
1. **Acute pain**
2. **Chronic/Persistent pain**

Acute pain is pain of recent onset, which usually has an identifiable cause and is there to warn and protect us in relation to an injury or disease. It is limited in duration and over a period of up to 3 months this pain will ease as normal tissue repair processes occur.

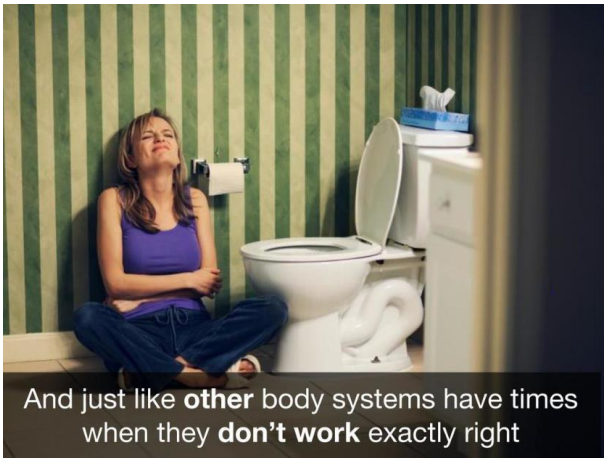
Chronic/Persistent pain is pain that continues after the time that normal healing processes are thought to have occurred. Therefore, it is generally described as pain persisting longer than 3 months after the onset of injury or disease.

Why does persistent pain occur?

In the same way that we have a respiratory system, a cardiovascular system, and a gastrointestinal system, we also have a nervous system that we use to detect, process and respond to painful stimulus.



Our gastrointestinal, respiratory and cardiovascular systems can often malfunction and cause us to become ill. Our nervous system, like these other systems, can also malfunction causing an alteration in how our brain perceives and responds to pain.



Why does the nervous system malfunction?

Neuroscience research has demonstrated that a malfunctioning nervous system becomes hypersensitive and continues to behave as though there is ongoing disease or injury, so the person still experiences pain as they do in the acute pain phase.

As the whole nervous system can be affected by hypersensitivity, you can start to feel widespread pain in other areas of your body that are often unrelated to the initial injury or disease.

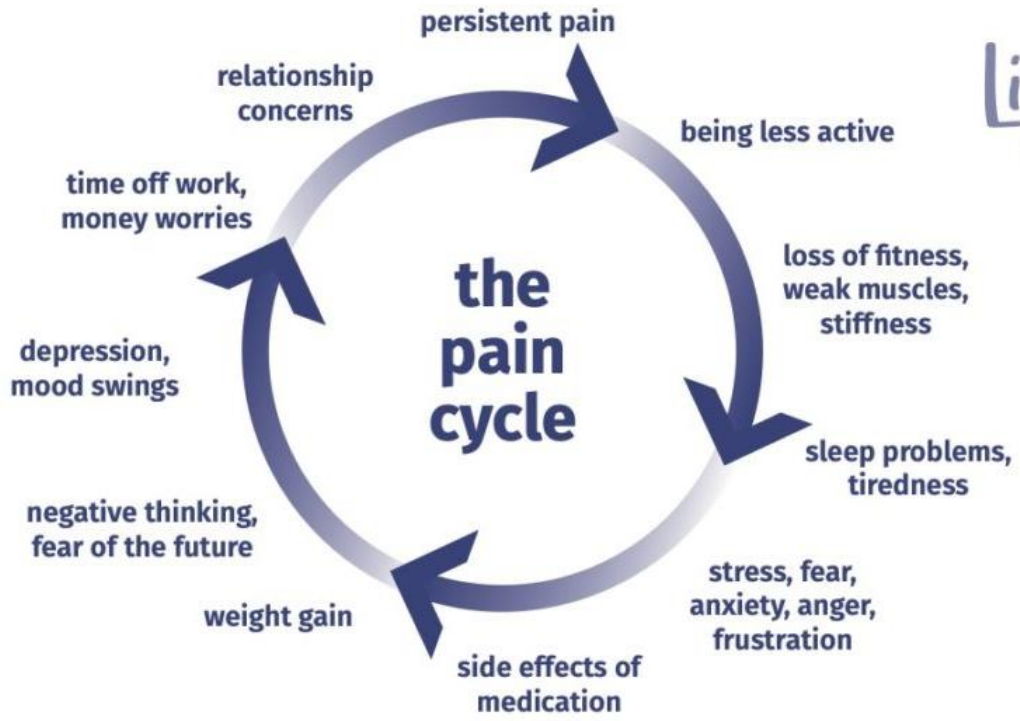
...the nerve hyper-sensitivity can start to ***spread*** to other parts of the body

What causes nerve hypersensitivity?

It turns out that the brain can also release chemicals that **amplify** pain related nerve message

Nerves tend to become hypersensitive due to the release of stress related hormones in the body.

The persistent pain cycle on the next page demonstrates various factors that can cause an increase in these stress related chemicals, leading to increased hypersensitivity that can spiral out of control causing long term pain; a progressive lack of function; and an inability to undertake activities of daily life.



How do I best manage persistent pain?

Long term pain can be frustrating and disabling for many people as they find themselves trapped within the persistent pain cycle with no obvious light at the end of the tunnel, particularly as many standard medical interventions do not provide the "quick fix" they search for.

Our approach to the management of persistent pain is to help reduce nerve hypersensitivity by:

(1) reducing the release of stress related hormones

(2) stimulating the release of pain relieving chemicals in your body.

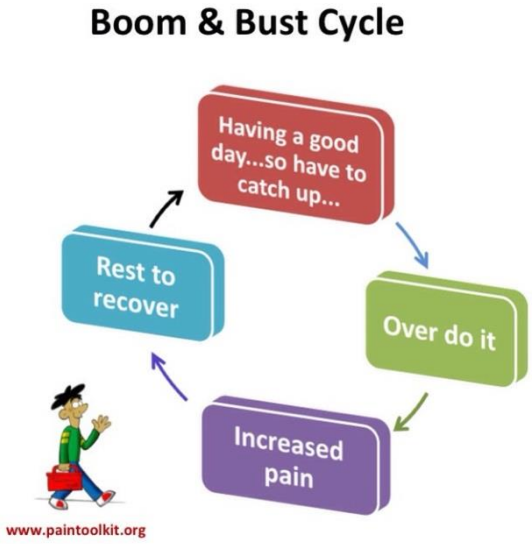
Strategies for managing persistent pain:

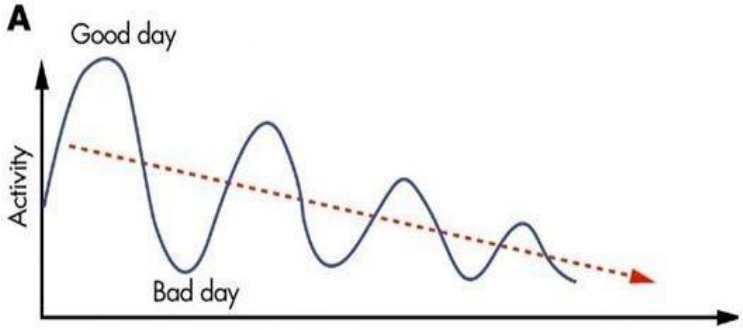
1. **<u>Acceptance</u> – the first step in managing persistent pain is having an understanding that pain doesn't necessarily equate to tissue damage and changes seen on x-ray and scans are often normal age related changes that have no significant bearing upon your pain presentation. It is important to accept that there is no "Quick-Fix" for your persistent pain. You need to take control and develop better self-management strategies for your condition.**

2. **<u>Medications</u> – you can discuss various pain relief options with your GP or Pharmacist to better manage your pain levels.**

3. **<u>Build a support team</u> – Obtaining help and support from various healthcare professionals, friends, family and support groups in your community can help build your confidence and develop a range of self-management strategies.**

4. **<u>Pacing</u> – Pacing your daily activities is the key to self-managing your pain. You want to avoid a "Boom & Bust Cycle". This is where you tend to over-do things on days you feel good. Pain levels may increase meaning you take extended periods of rest in an attempt to recover. This cycle of overdoing activity, followed by extensive periods of inactivity has a negative impact upon your overall functional capacity in the long term as you become more de-conditioned.**





<u>How do we pace our activity?</u>

You need to establish a base level were you can recognise the warning signs that you are doing too much and are at risk of flaring up.

The key to pacing is to ensure you take a break before you need one!!

Avoid tackling all your tasks at once and learn to prioritise which tasks are essential

By avoiding the Boom & Bust activity trap you will have less frequent periods of pain and inactivity.

Your body will become stronger having not had any prolonged periods of pain and inactivity, and over time you will be able to do more and set your baseline higher.

5. **<u>Prioritise, plan and set goals</u> – Prioritising and planning your day is essential. Make a list of things you would like to do, prioritise which require your attention first and make a plan of how you can achieve this, taking into consideration your pacing strategies.**

- **Set yourself some realistic and achievable long term goals, then consider how you might achieve these by setting yourself daily/weekly short term goals that allow you to gradually build up your activity level.**

- **You can track your progress by keeping a diary so you can easily see how you have progressed**

- **Each day you should set yourself an activity goal, a relaxation goal and a goal that is fun and enjoyable**

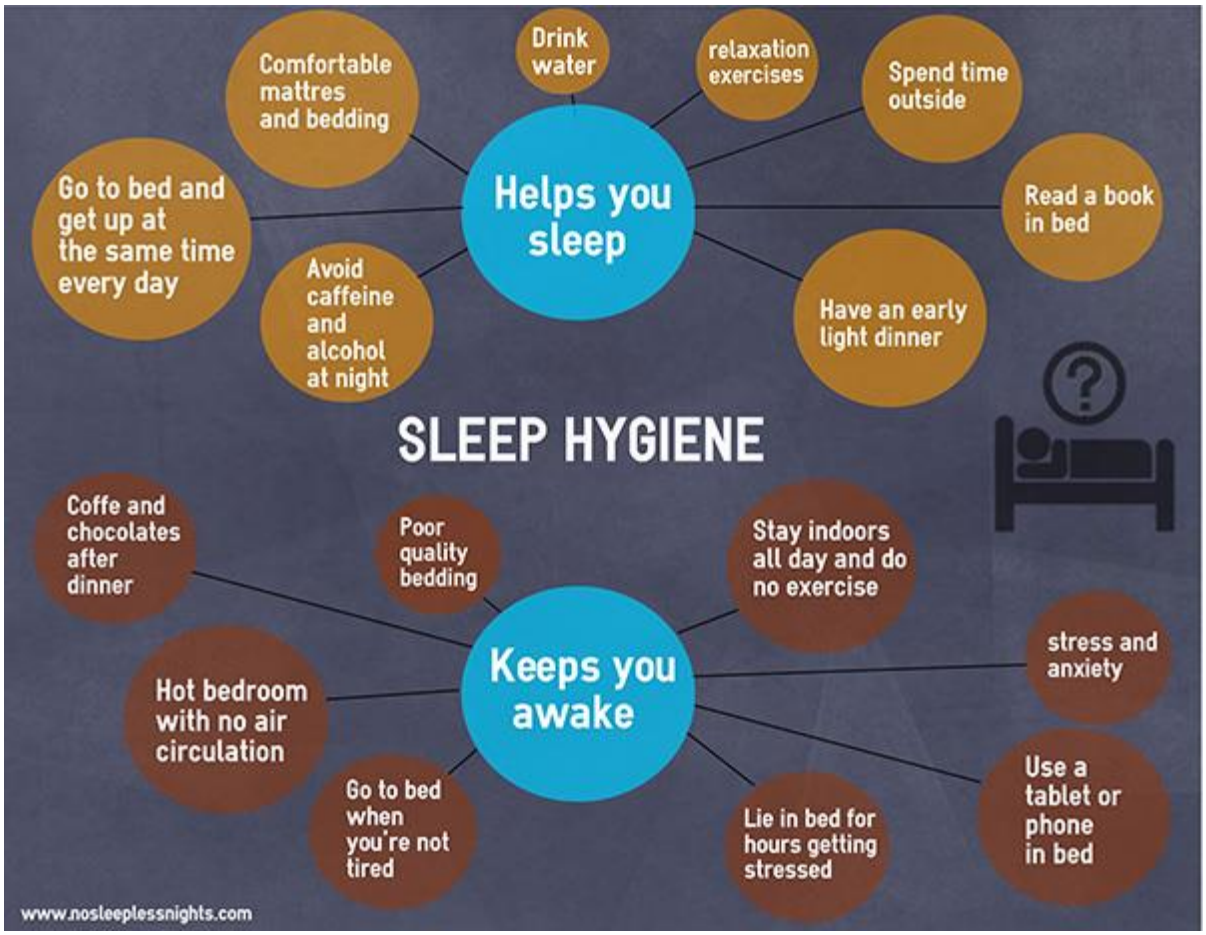
- **Ensure that your goals are realistic, enjoyable, specific and time set, for example:**

Monday		
Goal	**Aim/Target**	**Time of day**
ACTIVITY	***Walk x 20 mins or stretch x 15 mins***	**4pm**
RELAXATION	***Lie on top of the bed x 20 mins listening to music and do breathing exercises***	**9pm**
FUN	***Play a game with the kids***	**7pm**

6. **<u>Relaxation</u> – Relaxation allows your body and mind time to unwind, helping to ease muscle tension and pain. Examples could include:**

- **Listening to music**
- **Reading a book**
- **Meditation**
- **Breathing control exercises**
- **Meeting with friends for coffee/tea**
- **Going to the cinema**

7. **<u>Improve your sleep quality</u> - Changes in sleep pattern, such as poor quality sleep can be associated with the development of painful conditions. It is important to establish a good sleep routine and improve your sleep quality when managing persistent pain.**



8. **<u>Exercise</u> – Many people with persistent pain fear exercise in case it causes their pain to increase. Research shows that participating in regular exercise actually has a positive impact upon persistent pain.**

***<u>All types of exercise are good</u>* - pick one that you enjoy, can afford and that is convenient. Walking, swimming, cycling, jogging, running, stretching & strengthening exercises are all good.**

It is normal for deconditioned muscles to initially feel sore when starting to exercise. It is important to gradually increase your activity levels over a period of time, by implementing good pacing strategies.

Your physiotherapist can tailor a specific programme for your condition allowing you to make steady progress.

What are the benefits of exercise?

- **Reduced muscle tension and spasm**
- **Improved flexibility**
- **Improved muscle strength and endurance**
- **Improved cardiovascular fitness**
- **Pain relief by releasing chemicals that help reduce nerve hypersensitivity**
- **Stimulates the production of Lubricin – a substance produced during physical activity that helps to lubricate the joints allowing tendons to glide and joints to slide more efficiently with less pain**
- **Improves your mood and reduces stress**
- **Improves your sleep quality**

9. **<u>Develop strategies for managing set-backs and flare ups</u> – accepting that set-backs can occur is important. Make note of what triggered your set-back and what self-management strategies you implemented to help you recover so you know for the future. You may initially need to modify your activity levels during the early onset of a flare up, but after a few days you should attempt to progressively increase your activity levels again with good pacing strategies.**

10. **<u>Having a positive outlook</u>, being less fearful and anxious, and being persistent with your self-management strategies long term is the key to taking control of your persistent pain. Reward yourself when you achieve a goal…even the smallest of steps is an achievement!**

Scan the QR code for further information on our website on the causes and management of persistent pain.

SCAN ME

The information in this booklet is for guidance only and is in no way intended to replace professional clinical advice from a registered Physiotherapist.

<u>Updated October 2022</u>