

Flare ups of chronic pain can happen even with a good pain management plan in place. Indeed, the nature of chronic pain is that sometimes it will flare up without any obvious reason. It is important to plan for these times to reduce the impact of pain on your life. However, after **spinal cord injury**, when you experience a flare up in your neuropathic pain, it can mean many different things:

- It may be a regular pain flare up that is not a cause for concern.
- It may be a flare up from an increase in your activity or from a particular event.
- It may be a flare up of pain or a new pain that needs medical attention.

SCI FACT: Do you notice that when you are unwell, your neuropathic pain flares up and your spasm gets worse? For example, if you have a urinary tract infection, you might notice that your nerve pain in your legs increases and your muscle spasm is stronger? Spasm and neuropathic pain can increase when there is a painful stimulus below your injury level - listen to your body and take notice of patterns and changes.

If you are unwell, your pain management routine will be interrupted and your pain levels could increase. It is important that you remember that there are ways you can manage to stay in control of your pain, even during these particularly challenging times.

Ask yourself these questions to check for possible medical causes for a change in your pain. If you **tick any of these items discuss it with your doctor or health professional as soon as possible.**

Health screening questions

<input type="checkbox"/> This is a new pain (pain in a new location or pain that has new characteristics)
<input type="checkbox"/> This is a significant flare up (or worsening) of an existing pain
<input type="checkbox"/> There has been a recent change in my level of sensation
<input type="checkbox"/> There has been a recent decrease in my muscle strength or function
<input type="checkbox"/> I have had a fever and / or chills
<input type="checkbox"/> I have noticed nausea, a lack of appetite and/or weight loss
<input type="checkbox"/> This pain causes me to have symptoms of Autonomic Dysreflexia
<input type="checkbox"/> I have noticed a recent change in my bladder function (eg: frequent UTI, new leakage)
<input type="checkbox"/> I have noticed a recent change in my bowel function (eg: constipation, bowel accidents)
<input type="checkbox"/> I have a current area of skin breakdown
<input type="checkbox"/> I have had a recent fall or trauma
<input type="checkbox"/> There has been an increase in my muscle spasms

Following SCI it is important that you **get to know your pain**. You may have a “normal pain” or a baseline level of pain that you experience regularly – some people describe this as a “hum” or a “buzzing” in their body. Under some circumstances it might be a different pain or an increase in your baseline pain – this is like “the hum getting louder”. An increase like this could be from a pressure injury or a urinary tract infection for example. Pain could increase or change with autonomic dysreflexia, or from trauma or a problem below your level of SCI where your sensation is reduced. Only you can really know your body and you will learn to “read” the messages that it gives you. It is important that you learn to do this and that you learn to trust yourself.

A flare up plan is an important part of your pain management toolkit. By preparing a **FLARE UP PLAN** when your pain levels are well managed you can then use the plan to help direct your actions when your pain is more severe. It is important to share your flare up plan with the person / people that you turn to for help in managing this pain, so they are aware of how to provide assistance in a way that you find most helpful. You could also put a copy of your plan in the medicine cabinet, so when you reach for your pain medication you are also reminded of other helpful strategies.

A flare up plan has two parts:

1. A plan to **AVOID** a flare up
2. A plan of **WHAT TO DO** if a flare up happens



After you have experienced a flare up, and tried out your flare up plan, it is important to reflect on what happened during the flare up and see if there is anything you can learn from it to reduce the risk of having another flare up in future.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What happened during the flare up? Reflect on how your flare up plan worked for you.
2. Was this flare up predictable or preventable? Did I over-do something and if so what?
3. Have I been taking good care of my general health?
4. What can I do now to move forwards? What can I learn from the experience?
5. Do I need to adjust my flare up plan for the future?

Remember! Flare ups can be a normal part of chronic pain but after a spinal cord injury, pain can often flare up for other reasons. Stay positive - try not to be “down on yourself” when you go through a flare up. Listen to your body, learn from the experience, and plan your response to pain flare ups so they don’t detract from your overall pain management plan.

PLAN - TO AVOID A FLARE UP

Questions	Answers
1. What are the high risk situations?	Getting a bladder infection increases my nerve pain
2. What are the triggers?	Not drinking enough water and being stressed and tired
3. What are the warning signs?	Cloudy, smelly urine, feeling very tired and an increase in the nerve pain in my legs
4. How can I avoid a flare up?	1. Drink 6-8 glasses of water each day
	2. Use a clean technique every time for catheterising
	3. Reduce my alcohol intake and get enough rest

PLAN - WHAT TO DO IN A FLARE UP?

Strategy	My Flare Up Plan
Pacing	Add extra rest breaks to deal with the fatigue while I am unwell
Physical Activity & Exercise	Reduce my activity but don't stop activity all together while I recover
Lifestyle & Nutrition	Make sure I drink 6-8 glasses of water each day
Medications	See my GP to get my urine tested and antibiotics prescribed if needed
Thoughts & Feelings	Remember that I have been through flare ups before and I will be ok
Sleep	Try a relaxation session before bedtime to improve my sleep

2. Sample Flare up Plan

Back pain and nerve pain from travelling long distance

PLAN - TO AVOID A FLARE UP

Questions	Answers
1. What are the high risk situations?	Travelling in the car for long periods
2. What are the triggers?	Sitting still and not changing position for 2 hours
3. What are the warning signs?	Increase in my nerve pain and stiffness in my back
4. How can I avoid a flare up?	1. Change my position in the car seat every 30 minutes
	2. Take a rest every hour and stretch out – break up my journey
	3. Make sure that I remember my car pressure relieving cushion

PLAN - WHAT TO DO IN A FLARE UP?

Strategy	My Flare Up Plan
Pacing	Plan to break journey into shorter portions and factor in rest breaks
Physical Activity & Exercise	Stretch before the drive, 1 hour into the journey and after the drive
Lifestyle & Nutrition	Try to use mobile technology to reduce travel frequency
Medications	Take pain medication at regular intervals as prescribed
Thoughts & Feelings	Remind myself that it's going to be short term and it is not a reason to worry
Sleep	Prioritise getting 8 hours sleep the night before and after my long journey

Take notice how planning for a pain flare up makes you feel.

Reflect on ways to approach planning for a pain flare up.

TOP TIP! For more information take a look at these resources:

- <http://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain/spinal-cord-injury-pain/spinal-cord-injury-pain-thoughts-and-feelings>
- <http://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain/spinal-cord-injury-pain/spinal-cord-injury-pain-physical-activity-and-exercise>
- Read Chapter 13 of *The Spinal Cord Injury Pain Book* by Siddall, McCabe & Murray (2014 HammondCare Media)
- Read Chapter 17 of *Manage Your Pain* by Nicholas, Molloy, Tonkin & Beeston (2000 ABC Books)

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1. What are the high risk situations?	
2. What are the triggers?	
3. What are the warning signs?	
4. How can I avoid a flare up?	

PLAN - WHAT TO DO IN A FLARE UP?

Strategy	My Flare Up Plan
Pacing	
Physical Activity & Exercise	
Lifestyle & Nutrition	
Medications	
Thoughts & Feelings	
Sleep	

Notes:

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