

Understanding Exercise Progression

1 Why Exercise Progression Matters

Rehabilitation exercises follow a deliberate, evidence-based logic. The key principle is progressive overload — your body only adapts when challenged slightly beyond its current capacity. Too little load produces no change; too much risks aggravation. Your clinician is always targeting the therapeutic window between these extremes — the dose, timing, and type of exercise all matter as much as movement itself.

Inside your tissues, loading triggers mechanotransduction — cells sense physical force and respond by building collagen, laying down new tissue, and reorganising fibres to handle future load. Without that signal the body has no reason to rebuild. Consistent, appropriately dosed exercise at the right stage of recovery is what turns that signal into lasting strength.

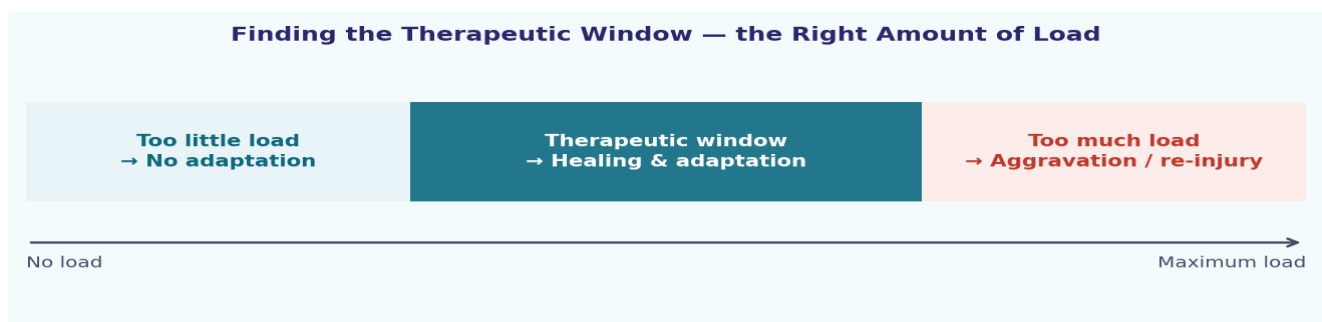


Figure 1 — The therapeutic window: the load level that drives healing without aggravating injury.

2 What Changes — and Why

As rehabilitation advances, several variables shift. Below are the key tissue adaptations your programme is designed to drive:

Adaptation	What happens	Timeframe
Neuromuscular	Motor control and coordination improve; movement becomes more efficient and precise	Days to weeks
Muscle strength	Muscle fibres increase in size and recruitment capacity with progressive loading	Weeks to months

Adaptation	What happens	Timeframe
Tendon & ligament	Collagen production increases; fibres reorganise and tissue tensile strength rises	Months
Bone	Mechanical loading stimulates remodelling; density and structural integrity improve	Months to years

3 The Traffic Light System — How to Self-Monitor

Learning to read your body's response is one of the most valuable rehabilitation skills. Use this three-colour guide after every session to decide whether to progress, maintain, or ease off.

Green — Keep Going



Signs: Exercise felt manageable. Minimal or no significant pain during or after. Any discomfort settled quickly.

Action: You are tolerating the current level well. Maintain, or progress slightly if clinician has guided you to.

Amber — Proceed With Caution



Signs: Some discomfort during or after. Settled within 24 hours. Symptoms no worse than your usual baseline.

Action: Stay at the current level. Do not progress yet. Continue monitoring over the next few sessions.

Red — Ease Off



Signs: Significant pain during or after. Symptoms lasted more than 24–48 hours, or area more swollen or hot.

Action: Reduce load or volume. Modify the exercise. Contact your clinician if symptoms persist or worsen.

4 Common Mistakes That Slow Progression

Mistake	Why it matters
Stopping when pain stops	Symptoms ease before tissue fully heals. Tendons and ligaments need continued loading to remodel — stopping early is a leading cause of re-injury.

Mistake	Why it matters
Doing too much too soon	Increasing volume or intensity before tissue has adapted overloads it. Gradual, consistent progress always outperforms aggressive short bursts.
Exercising inconsistently	Tissue remodelling requires regular loading signals. Sporadic sessions do not build the steady adaptation needed for lasting recovery.
Avoiding all discomfort	Mild, manageable discomfort ($\leq 3/10$) during rehab exercise is normal and productive. Avoiding every sensation of effort prevents the loading that drives adaptation.

5 Maximise Your Recovery — Key Takeaways

How to get the most from your exercises

- Quality over quantity — 10 reps with good form outperform 20 done sloppily; stop a set if form deteriorates.
- Warm up first — even 5 minutes of gentle movement prepares tissues and improves exercise effectiveness.
- Rest is part of the prescription — adaptation happens during recovery, not during the exercise itself.
- Communicate openly — if something consistently feels wrong, tell your clinician; they can only adjust what they know.

Key message 1: Exercise is a prescription, not just movement

The dose, timing, and type all matter — your clinician adjusts these deliberately as you progress. Trust the process.

Key message 2: Progression is earned, not rushed

Tissues adapt on their own timeline. Consistent, appropriately loaded exercise produces lasting change; shortcuts lead backwards.

Key message 3: You are an active participant in your recovery

Understanding why your programme is designed as it is — and monitoring your response with the traffic light system — makes the whole process more effective.