

Managing a Flare-Up

What to Do When Symptoms Suddenly Get Worse

1 What Is a Flare-Up?

A flare-up is a temporary increase in symptoms — pain, stiffness, swelling — that is a normal part of recovery for most musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions. It does not necessarily mean your condition is worsening or that you have caused new damage. Understanding why flare-ups happen helps you respond calmly and get back on track quickly.

A flare-up is not a setback — it is a signal. It tells you something about your load, your sleep, your stress, or your activity level. It is information, not failure.

2 Common Flare-Up Triggers

Trigger	Why It Causes a Flare	What to Watch For
Doing too much too soon	Exceeded tissue tolerance — more load than the tissue could adapt to at that point.	Pain that spikes during or 24 hours after a session.
Poor sleep	Lowers pain threshold and impairs tissue recovery.	Flares more common after 2–3 nights of poor sleep.
Stress or low mood	Sensitises the nervous system — the same activity can hurt more.	Flares during periods of high work or personal stress.
Illness	Systemic inflammation increases local tissue sensitivity.	Any illness can temporarily worsen existing MSK symptoms.
Change in footwear or surface	Altered load distribution can provoke irritated tissues.	New shoes, holidays, or different terrain.

3 What to Do During a Flare-Up

Action	Why	How
Reduce — don't stop — activity	Complete rest can worsen deconditioning and fear of movement.	Reduce intensity and duration by 50%; keep gentle movement going.
Apply heat or ice as appropriate	Heat relaxes muscle tension; ice reduces acute swelling.	10–15 minute sessions; always protect the skin.

Review your recent load	Identifying whether you overdid it guides your return.	Look back 24–48 hours before the flare began.
Maintain your routine otherwise	Sleep, nutrition, and daily activity still support recovery.	Don't abandon the rest of your rehabilitation plan.

4 Returning to Normal After a Flare

Phase	What to Do	How Long
Acute phase (peak flare)	Gentle movement only; reduce exercise load by 50%.	Until pain returns to your baseline level.
Early return	Gradually reintroduce normal exercises at reduced intensity.	3–5 days.
Full return	Resume your full programme when symptoms are back to pre-flare level.	Usually 5–10 days total.

The goal is not to wait until you feel perfect — it is to keep moving gently and rebuild gradually. A flare that is managed well rarely sets back your overall progress by more than a week.

5 Key Takeaways

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Flare-ups are a normal part of recovery. Most people with MSK conditions will experience flare-ups. They are not a sign of failure or permanent damage — they are your body telling you to adjust. Recognising triggers early helps you respond before the flare becomes severe.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Keep moving — gently. The instinct to stop all activity during a flare can make things worse. Reduce your load by around 50% and maintain gentle movement. Staying active at a manageable level keeps tissues responsive and prevents fear of movement from developing.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

A well-managed flare loses you very little time. If you respond promptly — reducing load, reviewing triggers, and rebuilding gradually — most flare-ups resolve within 5–10 days. The key is a calm, structured response: reduce, review, and return.