Load Management

Pacing Your Activity for Safer, Smarter Recovery

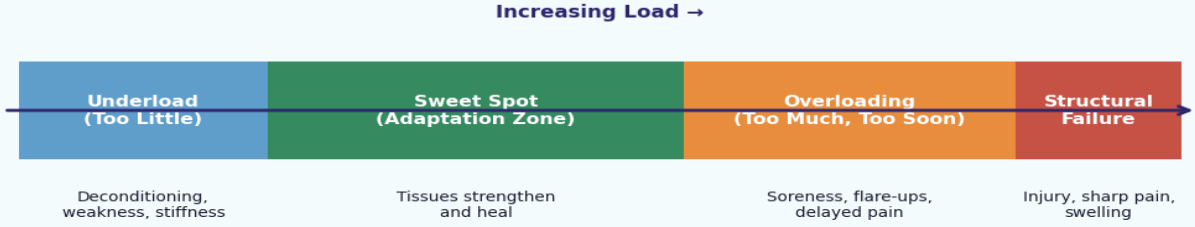
1 What Is Load Management?

Every step, exercise, or moment on your feet places a physical demand — called load — on your tissues, encompassing the forces, duration, frequency, and intensity of your activity. Tissues need stress to adapt and grow stronger, but too much stress too soon causes damage and pain. Load management means finding and staying within the zone between too little and too much — and expanding that zone gradually over time.

2 The Load–Capacity Model

Think of your tissues like a dam: the water is the load you apply and the dam wall is your tissue capacity — when load stays within capacity, tissues adapt and strengthen; when load repeatedly exceeds it, they break down. Your rehabilitation programme is designed to keep you training in the adaptation (sweet spot) zone shown below.

Figure 1: The Load-Capacity Model — Finding Your Sweet Spot



3 Two Types of Load + The 10% Rule

INTERNAL LOAD — How You Feel	EXTERNAL LOAD — What You Do
Pain during/after activity (0–10), morning stiffness, how long stiffness lasts, fatigue/perceived effort, swelling	Steps per day, time on feet, number of reps/sets, weight lifted, terrain (flat vs. incline vs. rough ground)

The 10% Rule — A Guide, Not a Law

- Don't increase your weekly activity by more than 10% per week — it's a useful starting guide, not a guarantee of safety.
- Large spikes matter most: injury risk jumps from 7.5% to 38% when weekly load spikes exceed 50% (Gabbett et al.).
- Even a single session more than 10% longer than your prior month's longest effort raises injury risk by 64% — check your morning response after every increase.

4 Practical Pacing Strategies

The boom-bust cycle — overactivity on a good day leading to flare-up and forced rest — is the most common pacing trap. The fix is straightforward: stick to your planned baseline even on good days, and stop before your pain stops you.

Strategy	What to Do	Why It Helps
Find your baseline	Test an activity 2–3 times; note symptoms during and next morning. Start at 80% of what you can comfortably manage.	Creates a safe starting point with a buffer against flare-up.
Increase one variable at a time	Change only duration OR frequency OR intensity each week — never two at once.	Isolates which change caused a flare-up and keeps increases manageable.
Use the morning-after rule	Check symptoms 12–24 h after activity. No change = good. Significant increase = load was too high.	Tissues report overload with a delay — the morning response is more reliable than pain during the activity.
Plan rest and deload weeks	Build in rest days between sessions; every 4–6 weeks take a lighter 'deload' week.	Repair and reinforcement happen during recovery, not during loading.

5 Common Pacing Mistakes

Mistake	Better Approach
Boom-bust: overdoing it on a good day	Stick to your planned baseline even on good days — consistency beats intensity every time.
Complete rest at first discomfort	Some discomfort during rehab is normal; aim for manageable pain (≤3/10) that settles within 24 hours.
Inconsistent activity spikes	Several quiet days then one very active day is as risky as a sudden large weekly increase — spread load evenly.
Ignoring the morning-after response	'It didn't hurt at the time' is not enough — always check how you feel 12–24 h later before deciding to progress.

6 Key Takeaways

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Your body needs load to heal — but timing and amount matter. Rest is not always the answer. Neither is pushing through everything. Tissues need the right amount of load to adapt and strengthen. Your clinician's job — and yours — is to find and gradually widen the zone between too little and too much.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Consistency beats intensity, every time. Doing a moderate, manageable amount of activity every day — even when you feel you could do more — builds more resilience than occasional bursts followed by forced rest. Small, steady steps forward always win over large, unreliable ones.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Your body gives you feedback — listen to it. Pain during activity is one signal. How you feel the morning after — once tissues have had time to respond — is often more informative. Settle into green (<3/10, no next-day increase) before progressing. Adjust at amber. Red means rest and contact your clinician.