



**Chronic
Pain
Ireland**



Movement Decision Guide

Your best way to move today

LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

Movement Decision Guide

A gentle, step-by-step guide to help you read your body's signals and choose movement that works with where you are today.



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***Please note:** This guide is for informational purposes only and does not replace medical advice. Always follow the guidance of your healthcare team.*

WELCOME TO YOUR MOVEMENT GUIDE

Finding what works for your body, day by day

Whether you are looking to build a new routine, try something different, or simply find ways to move more comfortably, this guide is designed for you.

Living with chronic pain means your body, energy levels, and abilities change - sometimes from week to week, and sometimes from morning to afternoon.

Movement is not a straight line, and there is no "one-size-fits-all" path.

Keep four simple principles in mind as you explore this booklet:

1. Revisit this guide often

Pain is not static, and neither are your movement needs, a bit like a game of snakes and ladders, your exercise ability can be up one day and down the next.

Return to this guide whenever your symptoms shift, when you want to try a new pace, or when you are recovering from a flare-up. Treat it as a flexible companion rather than a strict set of rules.



2. Every bit of movement counts

When it comes to chronic pain, any movement is good movement. Do what you can today, even five minutes of gentle stretching or a short walk around the room matters. Setbacks and high-pain days are a normal part of the journey, not a failure. Progress is built on gentle consistency over time.

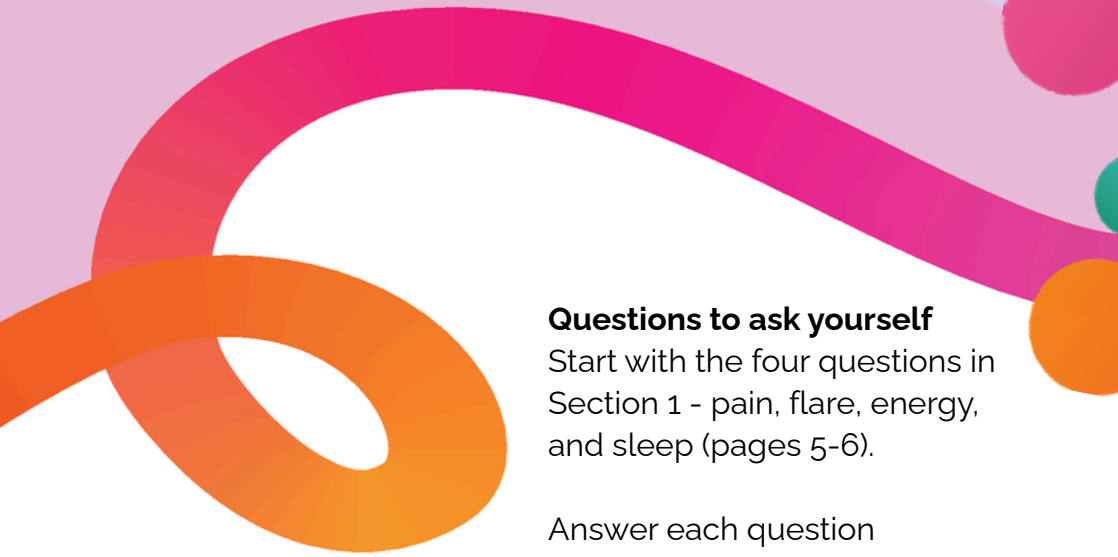
3. Guidelines are a destination, not a starting line

Health guidelines recommend 150 minutes of moderate activity per week, but chronic pain looks and feels different for everyone. For some, 150 minutes is realistic; for others, 5 or 10 minutes a day is a major win. Aim for consistency of movement over minutes to start.

4. Move at your own pace and celebrate your wins

This guide is here to support, guide, and celebrate every step, stretch, and effort you make. Listen to your body, honour where you are at today, and recognise every piece of movement as a positive choice for your health.





Questions to ask yourself

Start with the four questions in Section 1 - pain, flare, energy, and sleep (pages 5-6).

Answer each question honestly about how you are right now.

Use the Decision Path Summary table on page 6 to find your outcome page for today.

Return to this guide as often as needed. Your pain changes, so your movement plan should too. A flexible plan is a smart way to meet your body exactly where it is today.



SECTION 1 · QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Answer each of the four questions below based on how you are right now. Then use the Decision Path Summary on page 6 to find your outcome for today.

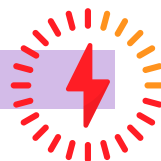
Question 1 · Pain Level

How is your pain level right now?

Pain			
0		No Pain	Comfortable to go about daily activities.
2		Mild	Doesn't interfere with daily activity but mindful to pace.
4		Nagging	Interfering with daily activity and ability to concentrate, but manageable.
6		Intense	Distressing and difficult to ignore. Daily tasks are a struggle and may need to be put to one side.
8		Severe	Physical activity limited and some help may be required.
10		Worst	Physical activity very limited and help required.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF · CONTINUED

Question 2 · Flare Check



Are you in a flare, or recovering from one?

A flare means your pain or symptoms are noticeably worse than your usual baseline.

- **Yes, I'm in a flare right now.**
- **Recovering - the flare is settling but not back to my baseline.**
- **No - this is my normal level of symptoms.**

Question 3 · Energy & Fatigue



How is your energy and fatigue today?

Living with chronic pain often brings fatigue. Listen to your body and let your energy levels guide how much you move today.

- **Good - I feel reasonably rested and able.**
- **Low - fatigued but not completely depleted.**
- **Very low - exhausted, struggling to function.**

Question 4 · Sleep Quality



How was your sleep last night?

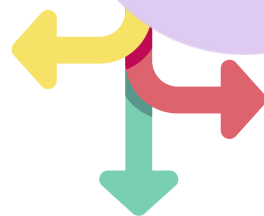
Sleep quality can influence the intensity of your pain and your ability to move.

- **Good - I got adequate rest.**
- **Non-restorative - I slept but not well.**
- **Very poor - barely slept or very broken.**



DECISION PATH SUMMARY - AT A GLANCE

Find the first row that matches you today



Pain Score	Flare?	Energy	Sleep	Outcome
7-10	Yes	Very low	Very Poor	A: Rest → P 9
4-6	Yes	Low	Non restorative	A: Rest → P 9
0-6	Recovering or resolved	Low	Non restorative	B: Post-Flare Modified Movement → P 10
0-6	No	Very low	Non restorative	C: Rest & Restore → P 11
0-3	No	Good	Very Poor	D: Gentle Movement → P 12
0-3	No	Good	Good	You are ready to pick a movement type → P 13



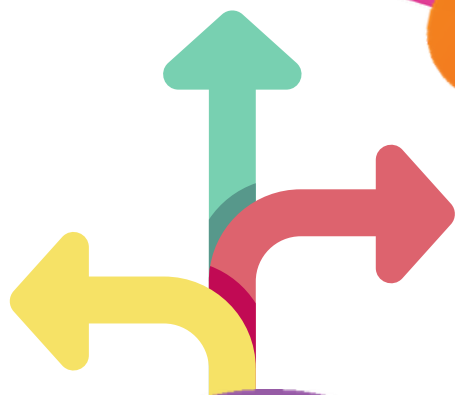
*Click on outcome
to go to that Page*

Your Outcome Options

This section is for deciding how to manage your movement based on how you're doing today.

Read the suggestions on your outcome page. Remember they are starting points, not prescriptions.

When you are ready for more, explore the *Types of Movement* section (pages 13-18) to learn which kinds of movement suit you, and when.



Outcome A · Rest

High pain or an active flare - your body is asking for rest

High pain (7–10) or an active flare is a strong signal from your body. Pushing through intense pain rarely helps and can prolong a flare. The priority is not to strain your body, but to rest and put gentle pacing strategies in place.

Resting is not giving up - it is an active, therapeutic choice. Honour your body's need for rest. Taking time to recharge is a necessary, healthy part of managing a flare.

→ Warmth: a bath, heat pack, or warm blanket if heat helps you.

→ Gentle breathwork, grounding, or relaxation exercises

→ Try micro-movements: wrist circles, ankle rolls, gentle neck stretches

→ Gentle bed or chair stretches



Note: Flares often pass faster with rest than with pushing through. Be compassionate with yourself. If you experience new pain, please attend your healthcare professional for a review.

Outcome B · Post-Flare Modified Movement

Ease back gently and budget your energy

As a flare fades, or on low-energy days, think of today as budgeting your energy. Your body still has the capacity to move, but your reserves are limited - so take slow, deliberate steps and focus purely on movement that restores you, ensuring it never costs more than it gives back.

→ Engage in 5 to 10 minutes of gentle, steady movement on a level surface (such as a slow walk, wheeling your wheelchair, cycling, or simple rhythmic movement). Always listen to your system and stop before you feel fatigue setting in.

Try a few gentle stretches while seated or lying down. Aim for a comfortable feeling of tension or release, without forcing your body or worsening your current pain.

→ Seated yoga, gentle chair stretches, or lying-down movement sequences.



→ Pool walking or gentle hydrotherapy if accessible.

→ Later in the day, take a quiet moment to notice how your body responded to the movement. If you feel a manageable level of tiredness, you've likely found your current pacing sweet spot.

→ You don't have to stop moving, but consider lowering the volume today. If you choose to do aerobic or strength exercises, keep the intensity light and easily within your current comfort zone.



Note: Pacing for tomorrow: If you live with post-exertional malaise (PEM), energy crashes can be delayed. The safest strategy is to finish your movement while you still feel good, keeping plenty of energy in reserve. Try to wrap up your activity while you still have a little left to give.

Outcome C · Rest & Restore

Manage pain and fatigue

When fatigue is severe alongside pain, your body's resources are stretched thin. Pushing through significant movement today can draw heavily on tomorrow's energy, so focus on gentle activities that feel restorative and easy. If you are too exhausted to move, that is okay. Rest is your priority today.

→ Mindful Resting: Try a body scan and think of it as bringing a gentle light to different parts of your body, one area at a time.

Starting at your toes and moving up to your head, simply explore and notice how each area feels with curiosity and no judgement.

On each exhale, invite any holding or guarding in your muscles to gently release or melt into a soft, relaxed position.



→ Try a few slow, small micro-movements, like gently turning your head from side to side or rolling your ankles-right from where you are lying down or sitting.

→ Lean into sensory comforts. Whether it's the soothing weight of a heated wrap, a soft pair of compression socks, or your favourite cosy blanket-choose whatever makes your body feel safe and cushioned today.

COZY
Vibes



Note: Choosing to rest intentionally is a powerful act of recovery. You aren't doing nothing-you are actively helping your body heal.

Outcome D · Gentle Movement

When your sleep hasn't been good, let your body lead

Non-restorative sleep naturally lowers our pain threshold, and it can make our usual energy signals a bit tricky to read. You might feel a sudden burst of motivation today, but the kindest approach is to take things a step lighter than usual.

→ Focus on slow, gentle movement at home—spending your energy on a valued activity that feels meaningful and manageable for you today.

→ On poor-sleep days, swap heavy weights or intense cardio for lighter options. If you want to keep up your momentum, focus on light cardio or resistance training and save the higher-effort training for when you're well-rested.

→ Slow stretching – hold comfortably for 20–30 seconds, breathe through it.

→ 15–30 minutes walking, cycling, wheeling on flat ground at a moderate pace

→ Gentle swimming or warm water movement if available



Types of Movement

This section is for reading in your own time.

Each page introduces one type of movement, what it offers, and how to approach it gently.

This helps you build a routine using the movement type that suits you best, and figure out when is the best time to do it.

Walking - P 14

Stretching & Mindful Movement - P 15

Water-based Movement - P 16

Strength Training - P 17

Aerobic Activity - P 18



Walking

Walking is one of the most accessible and evidence-supported activities for people living with chronic pain. Even 10–20 minutes offers meaningful benefit.

→ Start on flat, even ground where pacing yourself feels easy. As your confidence grows, you can slowly introduce gentle inclines, gradually building up to outdoor hikes or the challenge of walking on uneven ground, like a sandy beach.

→ Start with a time goal, not a distance goal. You might begin with just 5, 10, or 15 minutes. Focusing on time makes it easy to simply turn around and head home when you hit the halfway mark.

→ When you feel ready to add more, do it gently. A good guide is the **10% rule** - which simply means adding just a minute or two to your walk each week. Let your body get fully comfortable with this new baseline before stepping up again.



Note: Listen closely to your body. If your pain starts to feel louder than usual while you're out, feel free to ease your pace, take a comfortable seat, or simply make it your cue to turn back gently.

Stretching & Mindful Movement

Practices like gentle yoga, Tai Chi, stretching, and mindful movement are wonderful tools for navigating chronic pain. Beyond just improving flexibility, these slow, intentional movements can support a sense of calm and gently rebuild a kind, peaceful connection with your body.

→ Give yourself time to settle into each position. Instead of bouncing or forcing a movement, aim for a gentle, steady stillness. Pausing for a few relaxed breaths gives your muscles the time they need to naturally soften.

→ Breathe comfortably: Keep your breath flowing steadily through each movement. If you catch yourself holding your breath, simply ease back a fraction until you can breathe easily again.



Note: Consider a quick chat with your physio before diving in. They can guide you on which poses to lean into and which ones to gently modify.

Water-Based Movement

While any movement you enjoy is a wonderful choice for chronic pain, water offers a uniquely supportive environment. Because the buoyancy of water takes the pressure off your joints, it acts like a gentle cushion, supporting your body weight and allowing you to explore movements that might feel a little too challenging on land.

→ Choose a temperature that works for you: While specialised hydrotherapy pools are lovely and warm, standard community pools are wonderful too. Pay attention to how your body responds, and pick the space where your muscles feel the most relaxed.

→ Pool walking is a great starting point if walking on land is difficult.

→ Explore local options: Take a look at what your local community centres, gym pools, or council leisure sites offer. Many places host gentle aqua aerobics or "accessible swim" sessions designed specifically for people looking for a slower, lower-impact pace.

→ Moving in water doesn't have to mean swimming. Holding onto a pool float for a supported float or doing a few slow, easy stretches at the pool wall is a beautifully effective way to care for your body.



Strength Training

Strengthening is for everyone

Strength training has incredible evidence for easing chronic pain, but it doesn't have to look like lifting heavy weights at a gym. Strengthening is for every age and every condition, simply because it can be completely tailored to you.

By designing a routine around your specific needs, you can safely build the muscular support your joints need to make everyday movements feel lighter and more comfortable.

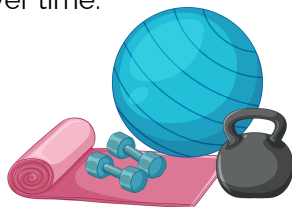
→ Start where you feel confident: Everyone's different, some prefer light weights, others gentle bodyweight movements. Pick a starting point that's kind to your joints and build from there.

→ Work in days of rest: Rest days are where your body actually rebuilds and strengthens. Listen to your body and balance movement with rest so you feel energised, not depleted.

→ Utilise professional support if available: A physiotherapist can help tailor exercises to you, but you're the expert on your own body—gentle home strengthening is always a safe place to start.

→ Distinguish between effort and strain: General muscle tiredness means they're working. Sharp or pinpoint joint pain is your cue to pause and adjust.

→ Trust the timeline: Your coordination and control will improve within two weeks of starting strength training, but significant strength gains take up to 12 weeks of consistent movement. Trust the process, your body will start to feel stronger over time.



Note: Delayed-onset muscle soreness (DOMS): Feeling a bit tender a day or two after trying something new is common and healthy. Unlike a pain flare, it feels like a broad "work ache" that eases with gentle movement or heat—simply a sign your body is adapting and growing stronger.

Aerobic Activity

Lift your mood and find your rhythm

Getting your heart pumping a little faster is a wonderful way to boost your mood, lift your energy, and tap into your body's natural pain-relieving chemistry. The key to enjoying aerobic exercise with chronic pain is finding a steady, comfortable rhythm.

By choosing activities you love and pacing them so you always finish with a little energy left in your tank, you can enjoy all the life-affirming benefits of movement without feeling wiped out the next day.

→ Find your "comfortable cruising speed": Use the "talk test"—aim for a pace where your breathing is a bit deeper and heart rate slightly up, but you can still comfortably hold a conversation. That's your sweet spot.

→ Choose the movement that brings you joy: Aerobic exercise can be anything that gets your heart gently pumping—walking, swimming, cycling, dancing—whatever feels kindest to your joints and makes you smile.

→ Start where it feels easy, then let it grow: Begin with whatever's comfortable—a 5-minute stroll, a few songs danced in the kitchen—and let sessions expand naturally as your stamina builds.



Note: Aim for the 150-minute horizon: Leading global health guidelines recommend working toward a total of 150 minutes of moderate aerobic movement each week. Think of this number as a long-term destination rather than a rule for today. Every single minute you do accumulates – so three separate 5-minute walks across your day count just as much as a single 15-minute session!

KEY PRINCIPLES TO CARRY WITH YOU



1. Pacing

Do less than you think you can, and build up slowly over weeks rather than days. Boom-bust cycles - overdoing it on good days and crashing afterwards - tend to worsen chronic pain, so steady beats speedy.

2. Track & learn



Log your pain, activity, and how you feel the next day. Over time, patterns emerge that show what your body responds well to. This knowledge guides your future decisions.



3. Mix aerobic & strength training

Global health guidelines for people living with chronic conditions recommend a mix of aerobic and strengthening activity.

Aim to gradually build towards a collective 150 minutes of some movement each week. If possible add strength training on two or more days.

Every minute counts, in whatever way works for you.



4. Self-compassion

Rest is not weakness, and adjusting your plan is not failure. both show hard-earned wisdom. Speak to yourself the way you would speak to a friend having a hard day.



5. Your team

Use this guide alongside (never instead of) your pain specialist. GP, or physiotherapist. They know your history and can help you tailor these ideas safely.



6. Every day is different

What you could do yesterday may not be possible today, and that is okay. Meeting your body where it is today is a skill, not a setback.





Phone:

01 804 7567



Email:

info@chronicpain.ie



Website:

www.chronicpain.ie



**Chronic Pain Ireland is
a registered charity in Ireland:**

Charity No: 10779

Company No: 238967

CRA Number: 20028022

Acknowledgements



This project was generously funded by Research Ireland through the New Foundations Scheme. We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all the individuals living with chronic pain who contributed their time, insights, and lived experiences to the development and review of this resource.



This educational resource was developed through a collaborative partnership between researchers at the School of Health and Human Performance, Dublin City University and Chronic Pain Ireland.