

## Pain: Activity Traffic Light - A Guide to Movement Safe Pain

### Daily Activities:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Baseline Pain: \_\_\_\_\_ (0-10)

Harm Check: \_\_\_\_\_

**RED LIGHT  
INJURY**

### Pain Behavior:

1. Severe spike in pain (7 or greater) during activity that stops you from performing the activity any longer
2. Pain persists for days to several weeks
3. Harm Check - **MAJOR CHANGE / LOSS** (greater than 50%) in range of motion, strength and function.

**Action Plan:** Notify Therapy Team and **STOP ACTIVITY.**  
Seek medical advice regarding injury.

**YELLOW LIGHT  
TOO MUCH TOO FAST**

### Pain Behavior:

1. Pain spikes during the activity between 4-7 on 0-10 scale
2. Pain **persists** after activity by 3 numbers above baseline for:
  - a. 2 hours if you are 4 - 8 weeks post injury/onset
  - b. 24 hours if you are 8 -16 weeks post injury/onset
  - c. 48 hours if you are 16 weeks - years post injury/onset
3. Harm Check - No change in range of motion, strength, and function.

**Action Plan:** Stay the course with activity. Run flare up plan if needed: rest, ice, meds (if able), continue normal activities, avoid new activities, think and speak positively, avoid negative thoughts and words

**YELLOW LIGHT IS SAFE PAIN = NO HARM**

**GREEN LIGHT  
CONDITION TOLERANCE**

### Pain Behavior:

1. Pain spikes during the activity between 4-7 on 0-10 scale
2. Pain is **no worse** after activity and back to baseline within:
  - a. 30 minutes if you are 4 - 8 weeks post injury/onset
  - b. 2 hours if you are 8 - 16 weeks post injury/onset
  - c. 24 hours if you are 16 weeks – years post injury/onset
3. Harm Check - No change in range of motion, strength and function.

**Action Plan:** Be confident in adding more activity!!! Add 1-5% more activity per day/session to gradually expose function return

**GREEN LIGHT IS SAFE PAIN = NO HARM**

This is an important guide that you can use daily with your activities and exercises. It will help you understand when your pain is safe, no harm has occurred, and help you to avoid a flare up and re-injury as you progress return of your activities. You want to use this guide to help you better understand your pain, how to respond when pain occurs, and if it is safe to add more activity or exercise. Sometimes when you have pain, you can misinterpret the meaning of your pain as harmful or have negative thoughts about healing tissues (examples of negative thoughts: “I’ll never get better, pain must mean I’m causing tissue damage, therapy is painful and must be hurting, I shouldn’t move because I hurt, these exercises or activities are too much for my injury).” These negative thoughts are a trigger that causes misinterpretation of your signals from your body’s tissues, increasing the sensitivity of your brain’s pain alarm system. This increase in sensitivity causes the brain to increase sensitivity of the receptors in your body’s tissues. The activity traffic light can be used as a guide to help analyze how your pain behaves to movement. This will ultimately build confidence and competence in self-managing your pain and adding activity.

## **Directions**

1. Write your average baseline pain at the top of the activity handout.
2. Identify 1-3 daily activities or certain therapy exercises that you want to do more of and write these activities on the activity handout (Daily Activity Examples: standing, walking, brushing hair, getting dressed, bathing, shoulder stretching, sit to stand, transferring, leg exercises, running, sports, etc).
3. Identify your “harm check.” A harm check is a range of motion, strength, or function that you can perform if you think you have done too much too fast, or more importantly you think you have injured yourself. This should be a movement or function related to your pain. Your harm check should be a movement or activity you have confidence in, not fear or concern in performing. It’s important to understand that your harm check is more credible than your pain to indicate if harm occurs. In addition, YOU are more reliable than the provider to make the analysis. Once you identify your harm check write it down on the top of your activity handout.
4. For the yellow and green lights under pain behavior, characteristic #2 circle which time frame pertains to your injury/onset of your pain. For example, if you are 4-6 weeks post your injury or 4-6 weeks you have had pain, then you would circle section “a” for both the green/yellow lights and use those specific time frames. If you have been having back pain for 2 years, then you would use section “c” and use those specific time frames. It’s important to understand that the longer you have been in pain your body will need more time to get used to the activity and soreness will last longer. As long as your “harm check” is no worse, it can be considered safe pain.
5. As you perform your identified activities, review the specific pain behavior of the traffic lights and follow the action plan. It’s important to be confident and competent in your decision to allow the brain’s pain alarm system to lesson sensitivity to your body’s tissue receptors.
6. When a yellow light occurs the flare up plan includes the following:
  - a. Modified rest, continue normal activities and avoid new activities
  - b. Ice 30 minutes 3-4x daily, take medications (if able) until pain returns to baseline continue
  - c. Think and speak positively and avoid negative thoughts and words
  - d. Compression or support garments can assist in reducing swelling and protecting the area of pain, at least for the first 72 hours or until your pain returns to baseline
  - e. Use pacing techniques for your normal activities, which may include spreading them out throughout the day or week

- f. Use relaxation techniques. Relaxation is a state of physical and emotional calmness. Try focusing on things other than pain, such as music, breathing or a pleasant image.

Flare up is a natural part of healing and does NOT equal harm; even with an increase in pain it is still considered SAFE. Think of the yellow light as “too much too fast.” You may have done more than your body was ready for. The more you repeat the activity or exercise the better your pain will be. Keep practicing flipping all-negative thoughts of harm and negative words associated to your pain and condition to positive words, especially when increased sensitivity is present during your flare up.

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