



Should you play through pain?

Use this four question checklist to decide.



— Written by Dr. Rajpal Brar, PT, DPT, Coach, Mindfulness & Performance Scientist

The Dilemma

When an athlete is having pain or discomfort, the dilemma for coaches, parents, medical providers, and the athlete alike, becomes:

Do you stop training and miss valuable training, practice and game time?

OR

Do you push through and potentially risk injury?

It's a difficult question because not all pain is created equal. It's not as simple as "if you're having pain, stop what you're doing immediately" or "no pain, no gain." Rather, there's normal characteristics and a range of pain/discomfort that are to be expected after activity and then there's characteristics and a range of pain/discomfort that aren't to be expected.

Understanding these nuances can be the difference between a healthy athlete experiencing a normal level of discomfort who can continue with their current activities and an athlete experiencing abnormal level of discomfort who's headed down the path of injury.

In the latter case, what I'll typically hear is: "I was feeling pain but I thought it would go away so I ignored it. But seemingly overnight, it became really bad and I can't even point to one specific cause". Many injuries can't be attributed to one specific event but rather build up over time and then hit a tipping point, medically referred to as "insidious onset injuries".

When I dig deeper into the athlete's history and the lead-up to that tipping point, obvious warning signs start flashing in my face. As the athlete, coach, and/or parent, what if you were able to recognize those warning signs? **That's why I created this checklist.**

It consists of these four questions:

- 1 - Is the pain/discomfort a 5 out of 10 or higher?
- 2 - What type of pain is it?
- 3 - How long has the pain/discomfort lasted for?
- 4 - Is the pain getting worse, better, or remaining about the same over time?

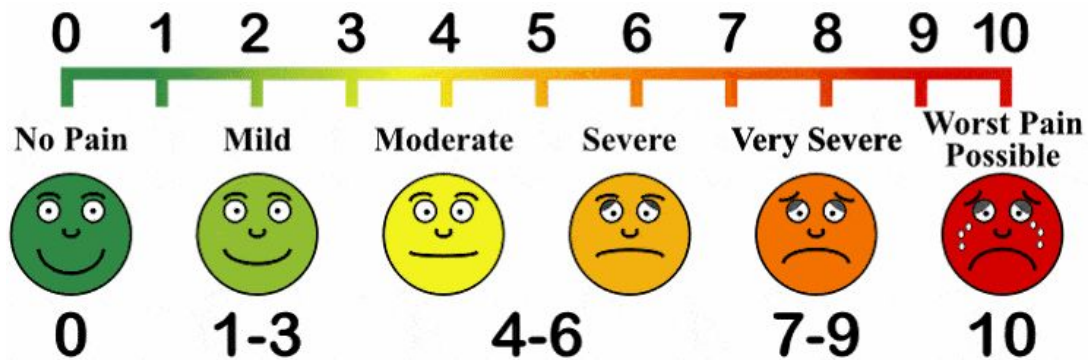
Let's take a look at each question in more detail.

The Checklist

During activity and the days following, answer these four “yes or no” questions:

1 – Is the pain/discomfort a 5 out of 10 or higher on the pain scale?

The pain scale is a subjective measure that will vary depending on each person but it’s still a reliable tool. Here’s what each number corresponds to:



The way I describe a “5” is a pain or discomfort that visibly affects or alters your mood.

2 – Is the pain type sharp, radiating, and/or electrical in nature?

If the pain/discomfort is characterized as either sharp or radiating/electrical, it’s hinting at something more serious that needs to be addressed immediately.

3 – Has the pain/discomfort lasted longer than 48 hours?

If the residual discomfort from the game, practice, or training lasts longer than two days, you did too much and the body needs more recovery time before getting back into strenuous activities.

4 – Is the pain/discomfort increasing over time?

Take careful note of the trendline: Is the pain/discomfort slowly creeping up from a two to a three to a four, is it decreasing, or is it plateauing? If it’s steadily increasing over time, that’s a key sign of persistent overuse and overload without adequate recovery.

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If you answer “no” to all four questions, then you’re on the right track with your activity level. However, if the answer to *any* of these questions is a “yes”, then the training load needs to be adjusted. The clues are out there, we just have to be aware of them and listen.

In Sum

This four question checklist is a quick and easy way to gauge physical response after an activity - whether you're an athlete asking yourself, a parent asking your child, a coach asking your team, or a medical provider asking a patient - and then adjust the training load as needed.

Instead of guessing “hmmm, maybe if we just keep training/rest, this pain will go away”, you can decide “this is or isn't within the normal limits so let's decrease, maintain, or increase.”

I see athletes on a daily basis who try to “push through” an abnormal level of pain/discomfort, don't modify their training load, and end up missing significant time due to injury. On the flip side, I also see athletes who are resting even though they're experiencing a normal level of pain/discomfort and end up missing valuable training and practice time.

The key is to understand the balance between the two and this checklist will help you find that middle ground.

For more info on injury prevention, rehab, performance, and mindfulness, check out [my blog](#). For questions or comments, feel free to reach out directly at rsbrar@3cbperformance.com



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