The UNC
Patient Education Packet
Guide to Using RPE

An overview on RPE purpose and use

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What is RPE?

Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) is used to see how easy or hard an activity is for you to complete. Just like the pain scale, the RPE uses a numbers scale, but goes from 1-10. You want to give the number that matches how much you feel your body is working.

Why do we use RPE?

It can be tough to rate how you feel on the RPE scale during an activity, but it is important to let staff know how you feel to make sure you are getting enough movement in while being safe. Activities you normally would do before coming to the hospital can become a lot harder during or after your hospital stay. It is important to keep using this scale to check and see if you are doing the right amount of activity.

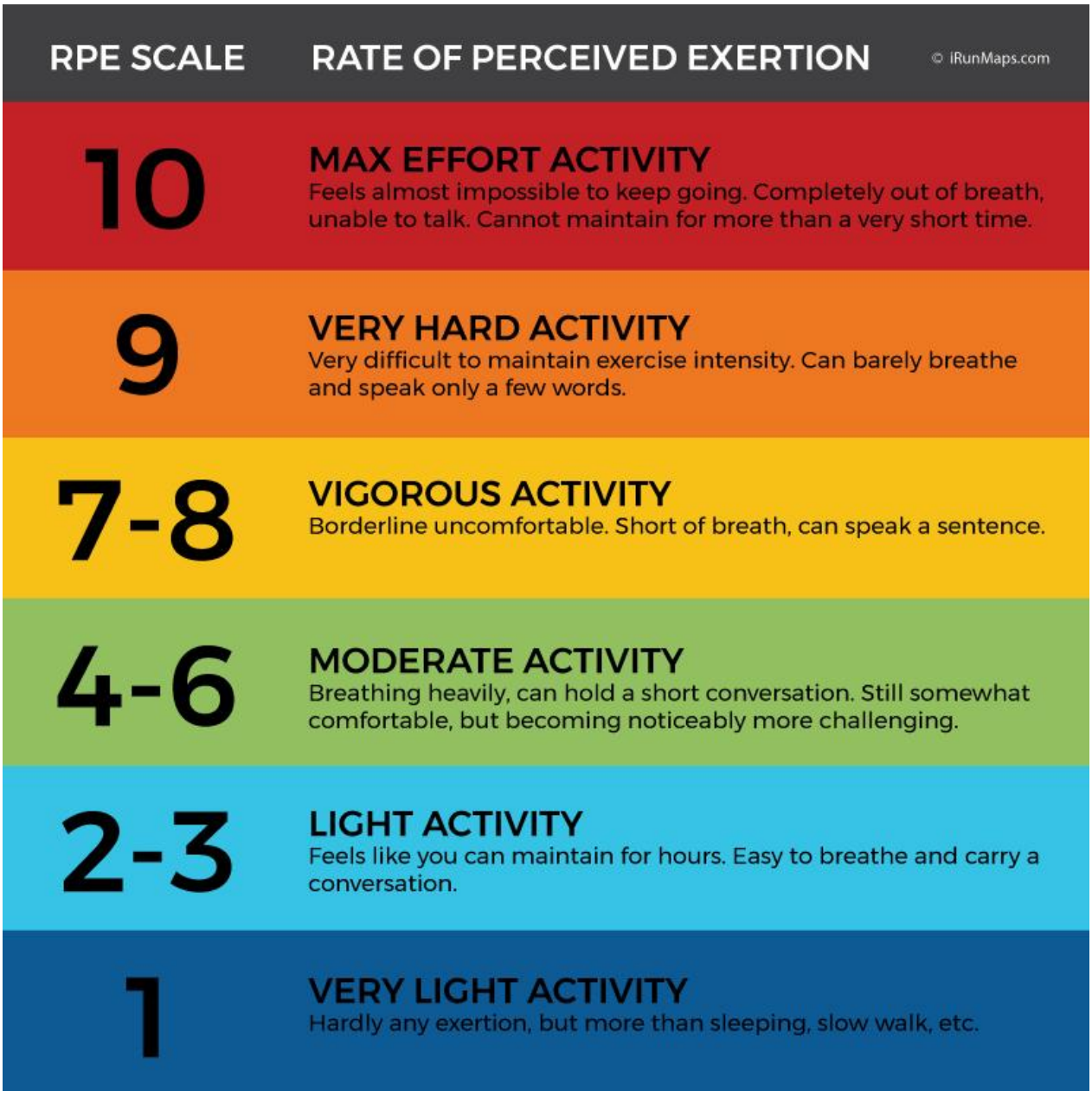
What effects RPE?

RPE should match how hard your body is working. If your body is working hard, the RPE number should be higher. Below are some things that could affect what RPE number you match to the activity:

- Heart rate: the faster your heart is pumping, the harder your body is working
- Breathing rate: the faster you are breathing, the harder your body is working
- Body temperature: the harder you work, the more your body temperature rises making you sweat
- Muscle fatigue: the harder you work, the more tired your muscles will feel

Modified Borg RPE Scale

Report the number that matches how hard you feel your body is working.



On the next few pages, we will look at the different levels of the RPE scale more in depth. Looking at this information can help you align a number to how you are feeling more easily.

- Very light activity
- Normal breathing
- Do not feel any different performing this activity as you do at rest

- Light activity
- Easy to breathe – just a noticeable difference
- Can sing a song during this activity
- This activity is not hard for you

- Light activity
- Breathing is a little heavier – slightly difficult to breathe
- Can have a long conversation during this activity
- You feel like you are warming up and starting to exercise. Your muscles are starting to work

- Light to moderate activity
- Breathing is heavy – moderately difficult to breathe
- Can have a conversation but not as long as before
- I feel like I am exercising! I feel good

- Moderate activity
- Breathing is getting heavier
- Can hold a short conversation
- Starting to get sweaty. I can tell I am working hard

- Moderate to vigorous activity
- Almost short of breath – hard to breathe
- Talking during this activity is getting harder
- I am definitely working hard but it is doable. My muscles are starting to feel tired

- Vigorous or hard activity
- Feeling short of breath
- Can speak a sentence
- I am now feeling hot and sweaty. My cheeks or face may be pink. This is a hard activity. My muscles are getting tired

- Vigorous activity
- Definitely short of breath – very hard to breathe
- Cannot speak a full sentence easily
- I am almost needing to stop this activity, but I can go a little longer

- Very hard activity
- Can barely breathe
- Can only speak a few words
- I am going to have to stop soon. My muscles are very tired

- Max effort activity
- Completely out of breath – cannot catch breath
- Unable to speak
- I must stop! My muscles are extremely tired

Another way to rate your RPE level could be using a facial expression scale that matches faces to the numbers of the RPE scale.

I am calm; I am resting or "chilling" 1

I am not doing much; easy activity 2

I am warming up; I am feeling good 3

I am exercising; I am feeling great 4

I am starting to sweat; I am feeling good but working hard 5

This activity is getting hard; I am feeling okay but tired 6

I feel like I am short of breath; I feel hot and sweaty 7

I am working really hard; I am using a lot of effort 8

I feel very tired; I can barely breath 9

I feel out of breath; I have to stop; I am extremely tired 10

GOAL: During your acute stay, your goal is to stay within the 4-6 range on the RPE scale. If you are a patient in the cancer hospital, your goal is to stay within the 2-3 range on the RPE scale.

GREEN = GOOD

Based on your own medical background and your reason for coming to the hospital, your physical therapist (PT) or occupational therapist (OT) could give you a specific RPE goal. Tell your PT or OT how you are feeling so they can give you just the right amount of therapy.

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