

Managing Fatigue

Guidance on Managing Post-Viral Fatigue

Information for patients following a viral infection

Post-viral fatigue occurs when fatigue (that started with a viral infection) lasts for a longer period of time after the infection has gone. People who have post-viral fatigue often report complete physical and mental exhaustion that is different to everyday tiredness. Severe fatigue can impact all aspects of life. This may affect your ability to engage in school, work, exercise, social and household activities. The following advice may help you to manage your fatigue and gradually get back to your normal activities:

Rest



Your body needs rest as it continues to recover. Continue to take short rests throughout the day even when you feel you are improving. Stop regularly and do nothing: rest your body, relax your muscles and try to calm your mind. Breathing, guided relaxation and mindfulness strategies can help you get good quality rest. You may wish to try different ways to relax until you find something that works for you.

Pace your activities



When you feel there has been an improvement in your fatigue, try a small amount of light activity. Break activity up with good quality rests. This might include using relaxation, breathing and meditation strategies. Try different ways to relax and practice these often. Try not to push through your fatigue. Be kind to yourself and start with less than you think you can do. Think about how your body copes and learn what works for you.

Limit 'thinking' activities



Thinking tasks (such as: reading, decision making, using electronic devices and worrying about your health) also use up energy. Try to prioritise what tasks are most important and plan to do these for short periods at a time. Remember to take regular breaks to rest even if you don't feel you need to. By overdoing things, you may slow any improvement to your fatigue.

Increase activity levels slowly



People often try to increase their activity levels too fast which can result in setbacks. It is recommended to increase both physical and thinking activities slowly. It can be helpful to complete an activity repeatedly, without feeling an increase in your fatigue, before trying to change your activity level. Try not to rush.

Work and study



You may be unable to get back to work or study as quickly as you had planned. Contact your work or place of study to discuss what changes and support they can provide. It is important not to return to work and study too soon. A flexible phased return may be helpful with shorter days and more opportunities for rest. Changes in work load should be very gradual.

Exercise carefully



Exercise needs to be approached in the same gradual manner as all other activities. Gentle exercise (such as stretches or a short walk) can be helpful. Even if you used to be very fit, it is important to start at a much lower level than you would normally do. It is really important to resume exercise slowly. Wait to see how your body reacts and adjust up or down as needed. Any increases in intensity or duration should be very gradual.

Daily routine



A routine can help with your recovery. Try to maintain a routine for: sleeping, eating, daily activities and good quality rest (which may include breathing and relaxation strategies). You may need more sleep initially but may wish to gradually return to your normal routine. Making changes to sleep patterns can be difficult so you should do this slowly.

Be kind to yourself



You (and others around you) may have expected a quick recovery. This may result in self-criticism and attempts to push through your fatigue in order to achieve tasks. This could make your symptoms worse. Accepting your fatigue is real and can be difficult to understand and live with, may allow you to make changes that help to manage your symptoms.

Look after your mental health



Fatigue can impact on all aspects of your life- including your mood. You may experience anxiety, frustration, guilt and low mood. It is important to look after your mental health. Try talking to others, keeping a diary, doing something enjoyable or breathing, relaxation and mindfulness strategies. There are lots of free resources available online and Apps that can be helpful. Speak to your GP if you find that your mood problems don't improve.

Further support for ongoing fatigue

Recovery from a viral infection will be different for each person. It can take several months (or sometimes a year or more) for people to fully recover from post-viral fatigue. If there is no improvement in your fatigue after 4 months and attempts to follow the above guidance have been made, then please seek further support from your GP as you may require further tests and referral to specialist services.

Additional Information and resources

- **The British Association for CFS/ME (BACME)** have produced more detailed guidelines on managing post-viral fatigue. These are available from <https://www.bacme.info/>
- **Action For ME** – A charity that provides further information and resources for those with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS/ME): <https://www.actionforme.org.uk/>
- **Living Life** – Free online self-help courses available for those living with chronic conditions and experiencing low mood or stress: <https://littf.com/>
- **Access to Work** – Disability Employment Advisor via Job Centre Plus, also for information on reasonable adjustments at work and access to work: www.direct.gov.uk
- **Breathing Space** – A free confidential phone line for anyone in Scotland who is feeling low, anxious or depressed. Phone **0800 83 85 87** (Mon-Thurs 6pm-2am, Fri-Mon 6pm-6am)
- **Apps**— If you have a smart phone you may wish to try using apps to help you get good quality rest. Some popular mindfulness and relaxation apps include; Insight Timer, Calm, Headspace, Breethe, Ten Percent Happier and Simple Habit.

Acknowledgements

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