

How to conserve your energy

Practical advice for people after having COVID-19

### **What is fatigue?**

Fatigue is a feeling of extreme exhaustion that interrupts or stops you from doing everyday activities. The usual things that once refreshed you such as sleep, doing a favorite activity or pastime no longer seem to do so. Some people describe fatigue as having 'brain fog', 'flat batteries', and 'being unplugged'. Sometimes people who have had a viral infection such as COVID-19 experience fatigue once the initial infection has passed. The severity of fatigue is different for everyone. Some people will still be able to go about their daily lives but have general, yet constant feelings of tiredness. Others could have more debilitating fatigue, which severely restricts their ability to do everyday activities. People with severe fatigue can become almost completely inactive as a result.

Mental and emotional tasks (not just physical tasks) can be very tiring for people experiencing fatigue. This might not have been obvious previously but it is entirely normal for those experiencing fatigue. It is also completely normal to find this period of fatigue distressing.

### **Managing and recovering from fatigue**

Learning to manage your fatigue begins with acceptance. Accepting you are experiencing fatigue will help you to manage the condition better and understand the best course of action for you and your recovery. It is normal for some people to take months to fully recover from fatigue, but recovery is possible. Experience tells us that whilst there are no shortcuts to quickening the recovery process, once you start to see measurable improvement in what you can do, you will begin to feel more optimistic about recovery.

It is also important to note that recovery from fatigue does not always mean a return to a pre-fatigue lifestyle. For some people, recovery will mean learning to manage their fatigue long-term.

### **Be kind to yourself**

At this time, there may be some of these tasks and activities that you feel you are not able to do. This will be frustrating for you, but it is okay and perfectly natural when you are experiencing fatigue. Be kind to yourself and don't beat yourself up about the things you are finding challenging at this time.

### **The 3 Ps principle (Pace, Plan, and Prioritize)**

Learning to pace, plan and prioritize your daily activities will help you to save energy.

#### **Pace**

Pacing involves changing the way you think about tasks, to do them more slowly or break them up with rests to prevent making your fatigue worse. It may also involve asking others for help with certain things or having to put off doing certain things until you feel more energized.

Pacing yourself will help you have enough energy to complete an activity. You'll recover faster if you work on a task until you are tired rather than exhausted. The alternative, doing something until you're exhausted, or going for the big push, means that you'll need longer to recover.

The pacing approach: Climb five steps, rest for 30 seconds, and repeat. You won't need a long rest at the top and won't feel so tired the next day.

The big push approach: Climb all the stairs at once. You'll have to rest for 10 minutes at the top and feel achy and tired the next day.

Top tips:

Break activities up into smaller tasks and spread them throughout the day.

Build rests into your activities, it's key to recharging your energy.

Plan 30–40 minutes of rest breaks between activities.

Sit and rest wherever possible.

## **Plan**

Look at the activities you normally do on a daily and weekly basis, and develop a plan for how you can spread these activities out. When considering your plan for the week, it is also important to fit in times when you can rest and recover. If certain activities make you breathless or fatigued, rather than do them in one go, plan ahead to do them throughout the day. Making a plan or routine can also reduce stress and anxiety, which can make fatigue worse, and can help you to find a baseline that your body responds well to.

Change the time of an activity: instead of having a bath or shower in the morning when you are busy, have one in the evening.

Do weekly activities such as gardening, laundry, and food shopping on different days, with rest days in between.

Top tips:

Collect all the items you need before you start a task.

Specially adapted equipment is likely to make tasks easier. If you have an occupational therapist, ask them for further advice and support.

You may get more done when family or friends are visiting and can help you.

## **Prioritize**

Some daily activities are necessary, but others aren't. Ask yourself the following questions to find out which of yours are necessary:

What do I need to do today? What do I want to do today?

What can be put off until another day?

What can I ask someone else to do for me?

Top energy-conserving tips:

Don't hold your breath during any task.

Try to avoid pulling, lifting, bending, reaching, and twisting where possible.

Push or slide items as much as possible, rather than lifting them.

Bend with your knees rather than from your waist.

## **Incorporating activity**

The only way to find out if your symptoms respond well to being more active is to try, very, very gently to do a little bit more, then Rest, Wait and Observe the effects.

**Rest** - take a planned rest break after the activity that you want to improve upon.

**Wait** - see how the activity has affected your symptoms.

**Observe** - monitor how you felt during and immediately afterward, a few hours afterward, and the following few days.

For example, if you walk for 5 minutes one day and feel OK, and then go for 10 minutes the next day, you may relapse. So, it is safer to do 5 minutes one day, wait a couple of days, and rest, then if you have no symptoms try 10 minutes the next time. It is essential for your recovery that you take the time to work out if physical tasks or activities always bring on bad fatigue symptoms, or if you can very gradually build up your activity.

If you experience no negative effects on your fatigue, that is great progress. If you do get symptoms, then you need to be very careful and try not to increase your level of activity just yet. If you find that your symptoms get worse, then make sure you rest enough and then go back to the previous level (e.g. 5-minute walk) and only progress when you feel confident that your body can cope with the extra time. Do this as many times as you feel you need to, trying out what level of activity works for your body. Prioritizing rest, wait, observe is key here. **You are not 'failing' if you don't progress quickly. It is not a race.**

Resources:

<https://www.rcot.co.uk/conserving-energy>

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/advanced-wellbeing-research-centre/projects/an-information-booklet-to-help-manage-chronic-fatigue-brought-on-by-covid-19>