

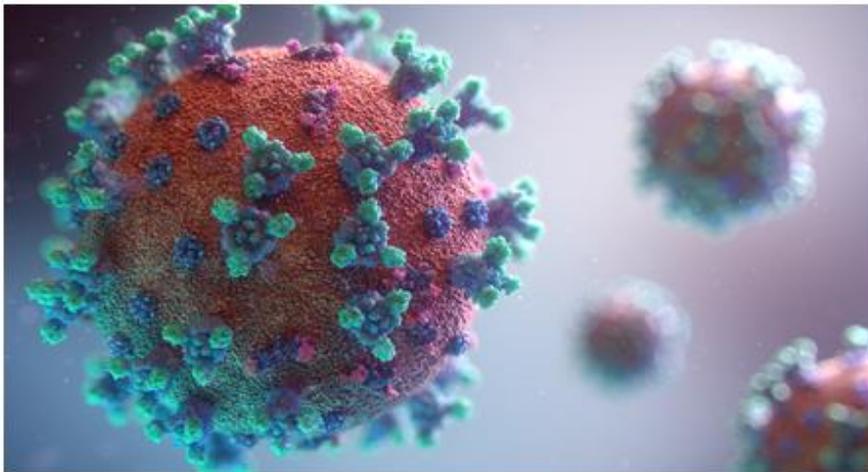
A Guide to Managing Post Viral Fatigue

Post Viral Fatigue

Post viral fatigue is a physical response that can sometimes follow a viral illness. If you had or wonder if you had Covid19 because you experienced some of the symptoms then anecdotal evidence (New Scientist, 15 April 2020) suggests that some people are experiencing a fatigue during the recovery phase.

It is common to experience fatigue after any illness and especially after a virus. Usually this is for a short period of time and you should return to normal health and functional ability. In some cases this full return to normal health may take several months to improve. If this continues longer than you would expect then this may suggest you need some advice and support in order to get better.

It is important to discuss this with your GP as there may be other reasons for ongoing fatigue which may need treating.



Symptoms

Common symptoms are sleeping more, feeling tired without having done much, feeling unsteady on your feet and being unable to stand for long periods or carry out activities you previously could. People describe having energy one minute and then feeling completely drained after minimal exertion.

To help you manage this we have put together some advice and recommendations which you may find useful.

Energy Conservation

When we are fatigued we naturally want to rest however resting too much can cause changes in your muscles which make it harder to do anything.

If you don't use muscles they tire more easily and become more painful after only a small amount of activity. This can lead to avoidance of any strain which increases the muscles' risk of experiencing fatigue and pain when you use them. This creates a vicious circle, and your body becomes de-conditioned.

We therefore recommend a balance between resting when needed and gradually increasing your activity levels.

You may find that your energy needs will fluctuate from day to day and hour to hour. Aim to do a little each day, but avoid overdoing it which can lead to "boom and bust". This is where you do too much in one go and can then do no activity due to fatigue.

When faced with a task break it down into smaller tasks and plan rest periods between. It is better to do little and often.

These ideas are often referred to as grading, pacing and goal setting;

Grading Activity This involves looking at all the requirements of everyday activities (such as physical, mental, social, environmental), establishing a baseline of what can currently be achieved and building up the activity in realistic steps.

Pacing This term mostly relates to the measured way of carrying out a task: it is only one aspect of grading. We can pace in different ways e.g. speed, resistance.

Goal setting Writing specific goals is a way of describing each step of your programme; it is a technique that helps you to focus on your targets and recognise your achievements.

Graded Exercise This describes exercise programmes which would not be part of your normal routine, in which you gradually increase the amount of exercise you undertake.

These are some examples of how grading, pacing and setting goals can help in everyday life; if you are finding everyday tasks like personal care and meal

preparation fatiguing, choose a smaller achievable task such as making a drink or making a sandwich and then taking a rest.

Do activities that you are comfortable doing. When tasks are difficult, learn to STOP and modify what you are doing. Preparing a full family meal may be too much - ask for help and maybe only prepare the vegetables yourself.

Generally consider ways to make everyday activities easier to manage. Give yourself plenty of time to complete any activity and do not rush.

Prioritise tasks and remember, they don't all need to be done today.

Remember to accept help if offered.



How are you feeling?

Often when a person experiences physical illness and subsequent post viral symptoms they can also experience emotional problems. This could be low mood or tearfulness, anxiety or frustration at not being able to do things as easily as previously. We have suggested some ways to help with this below;

- Think about the things you enjoy doing and try to incorporate some of these into your daily activities.
- Think about quiet leisure activities e.g. reading, playing computer game etc. But remember that these use cognitive energy so again you will need to limit the amount you do. Concentration and motivation can also be affected by post-viral fatigue so it is important to be gentle with yourself and not expect too much of yourself.
- Put together a diary of these activities and reflect on them to give a sense of achievement.

Ensure you keep in touch with friends and family and though physically isolated at the moment ensure you do not isolate yourself from people you enjoy spending time with. Use telephone or videoconferencing to keep in touch.

Be sure to share how you are feeling with those close to you – friends and family whom you trust. It is usual to feel low and fed up following an illness and others will often be happy to be there for you as a listening ear. Remember they are not mind readers and you may have to take the initiative to share how you feel. This is particularly true when we cannot see people in person as there is no non-verbal communication for others to pick up on. If you feel your mood is becoming worse, then do not hesitate to contact your GP or local mental health services for support (see contact details below for local services).

You may also find it useful to incorporate some form of relaxation/meditation into your day. There are a lot of information apps available for this. Listening to your favourite music and reading are also relaxing activities.

If you were previously used to being very active and attending work it can be very frustrating not to be able to do this. Sometimes your self-esteem can be affected if you feel you are not as competent as you used to be. At those times it can be useful to reflect on your strengths by writing them down to remind yourself of them. This may be the first time this has happened to you and it's very important to remember that post viral fatigue is a temporary part of the body's healing process.

At this time you need to focus on YOU. This might feel unusual if you are used to caring for others. Often we are not assertive in asking for our own needs to be met and we may need to learn to say 'no' to other's requests of us and focus on getting well.

Thoughts/Emotions/Behaviour

After having any illness, the **thoughts** that we have about our health and symptoms can influence how we feel **emotionally** (possibly leading to us feeling low in mood, anxious or frustrated and angry) and how we feel emotionally can have a 'knock on' effect on our wellbeing.

Further, our thoughts can also influence what we do (our **behaviour**) to help our symptoms. However, what we do or don't do (to help improve our health) can also potentially affect our **physical** symptoms.

Thoughts about symptoms could include how we 'interpret' continuing to have symptoms several weeks after a virus and what we 'make' of this now and what implications we think this might have for the future. We often think that once the acute symptoms of a virus have resolved our energy levels *should* be back to normal and we *should* be able to resume our usual former level of activity.

This can lead to anxious or sad thoughts, especially if we are someone who has been very active in the past and these thoughts can influence our behaviour; which can play a part in our recovery.

However, the effects of a virus on our wellbeing can last longer than we think and can be influenced by many different factors.

Sleep

As we've already said, when someone who is experiencing a post-viral fatigue they will usually want to sleep more. This is completely normal and part of getting better. Sometimes, though, sleep can be disturbed and some find it harder to sleep, even though they are tired.

It is important to have a good sleep routine while recovering. If you are having trouble sleeping try the following to help you:

- Make sure that your bedroom is well ventilated and you only use your bed for sleep.
- Relax before bed – try not to use devices such as computers in the hour before sleep.
- Have a bath if this helps you wind down.
- Don't drink caffeine or eat a meal just before bed.
- Try and have the same amount of time in bed each night –for example, 8-9 hours and keep a routine for getting up and starting the day.

Diet



Eating a balanced and healthy diet that contains plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and anti-inflammatory foods and avoiding heavy, greasy foods such as fried or fast foods may help (Medical News Today).

Make sure to drink plenty of water and as suggested previously, do not drink caffeine or eat a meal close to going to bed. Ensure you have easy healthy meals and snacks available to prevent unhealthy snacking when tired.

Moving Forward

Whilst you are recovering from post-viral fatigue it is a good idea to remain off work. Currently you may be furloughed so use the time to really rest and recover.

If you are in a job where you are required to go back to work, for example key workers, then make sure you are in contact with your manager and the Occupational Health Department if you need assistance in planning your return.

Do not be tempted to go back too soon as right now most key worker jobs are very demanding. You may need to build up to your full hours. Seek support from colleagues when you return and don't be afraid to ask for help.

If you are going to continue to work from home, then again, do not do too much too soon. Often people think that because they are on a computer at home they 'should' be able to cope and may be tempted or feel pressured to returning sooner than is helpful.

Do not be tempted to work longer hours because you are at home. Keep to a routine of start and finish times and try to work in a different part of your house to where you relax. Take regular breaks and put your computer away at the end of the day.

Remember, cognitive tasks need concentration and this can be affected with fatigue – you may need to take regular rests and build up to a full day. Make sure you discuss your needs with your manager and your Occupational Health department will be able to advise if you need them to.

References

www.newscientist.com

www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles

NICE guidance: <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG53>

Developed By:

Lisa Marshall, Specialist Occupational Therapist
Liz Holman, Team Lead/Advanced Practitioner (Occupational Therapy)
Dean Overton, Specialist Practitioner, CBT
Dr Hitendra Thaker, Consultant Physician
Dr Vandana Dimri, Consultant Psychiatrist

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) and Complaints

Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust

Trust Headquarters

Willerby Hill

Beverley Road

Willerby

HU10 6ED

Tel. 01482 303930

Email: HNF-TR.pals@nhs.net

Email: HNF-TR.complaints@nhs.net