

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



EXERCISING SAFELY WITH LONG COVID



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

This Essential Guide is about exercising with Long Covid.

It explains:

- the reasons that Long Covid may make exercise challenging
- how to safely manage exercise while dealing with fatigue
- suggestions of exercises which can be done without overstraining yourself

How does Long Covid affect exercise?

Long Covid, like other post-viral fatigue conditions, may make it difficult or even dangerous to exercise heavily.

It used to be thought that the problem was **deconditioning**, where the muscles lose strength with lack of use. Now we know that people with fatigue conditions have a lower threshold for **anaerobic exercise**.

Anaerobic exercise is where muscles which are working hard use a different chemical reaction to fuel themselves. This is normal - it is why even healthy people can be stiff or sore if they over-exercise - but in people with Long Covid, it happens much sooner.

This may mean that you are unable to exercise as heavily as you expect, or that certain exercises are not healthy for you.

Post-exertional exacerbation

People with Long Covid may also experience **post-exertional symptoms exacerbation** (also called **post-exertional malaise** or **PEM**). This is where symptoms get worse after activity. This can last for hours, days, or weeks after the activity itself.

“Activity” does not just mean physical exercise - symptoms can also be affected by mental or emotional work - but post-exertional exacerbation is likely to affect how you can exercise.

Post-exertional exacerbation is often part of the **“boom and bust”** pattern which a lot of people with fatigue experience. This is a pattern where you experience times where you feel much better (**boom**), but then overwork yourself, and as a result your symptoms get worse (**bust**).

Post-exertional exacerbation may affect:

- Your mood
- Physical pain or stiffness
- Tiredness
- Memory
- Your ability to hold a train of thought
- Balance or dizziness

The best way to avoid both boom-and-bust and post-exertional exacerbation is to know and respect your own limits.

IMPORTANT

None of this means that you are “lazy”, “not trying”, or “giving up”.

Post-exertional exacerbation is a medical condition which cannot be solved by “pushing through”. You are not to blame if you have to reduce or change what you do to protect your health.

Levelling out

When you are dealing with post-exertional exacerbation, the best thing to aim for is stability. You can avoid symptoms flare-ups by making sure that you don't overdo your activity. The key parts of this are:



Recognising all the activity you do, and what impact it has on you.



Finding your baseline - a safe level of activity that you can do consistently without your symptoms getting worse.



Learning to be aware of warning signs and triggers which let you know you may be close to your limit.



Making time for regular rest.

Tracking your activity

The first step in understanding your fatigue and what makes symptoms worse is to know what you are already doing.

It can often help to keep an **activity diary**. Templates for this are available online at www.chss.org.uk

Try to note down as much as is comfortable for you of the following:

- Physical activities you have done (e.g. walking, housework, shopping)
- Mental activities you have done (e.g. talking, reading, working at a desk)
- How long you spent on each activity
- How you feel overall
- Any particular symptoms that you have noticed that day.

Try to keep this diary for at least a week. This will show you any patterns.

Finding a baseline

Your baseline for exercise is the amount you could do **consistently** for five out of seven days **without your symptoms getting worse**.

People almost always think that they can do more than is safe. It is better to underestimate than to overestimate your baseline - you can always raise it later.

You can judge your baseline from an activity diary. Alternatively, if you have a smart watch or something similar, you can monitor your heart rate and breathing to see what activity has the most impact. The third approach is to consider what you can do on your worst days, and take that as a baseline.

Remember that your baseline will be affected by everything going on in your life. If you have a cold, or are stressed, or otherwise have other things to worry about, your baseline will probably be lower.



Top Tip

Start off from **half** of what you think you can do.

If you can do this amount without any change in your symptoms for more than a week, you can start to raise the bar.

Increase the duration and/or intensity of your exercise by **no more than 20%** at a time.

Your baseline is the upper limit.

It is absolutely fine to do less than your baseline. You should be very careful about doing more than your baseline in any given day.



Recognising warning signs

Although setting a baseline will help you to steady your activity, it may not always be enough. Other things in your life may make you more susceptible to post-exertional exacerbation, or make your normal symptoms worse, so that you can do less activity.

This means it is important for you to be aware of how you feel while you are doing exercise, and what things might suggest you are likely to experience worse symptoms if you continue.

These warning signs are very personal, and they will be different for different people.

Recognising warning signs of a flare-up is another thing where it can be helpful to keep a diary or journal of how you feel.

Some common warning signs that you may be reaching your limit include:



Pain or discomfort anywhere in your body that wasn't there before



Difficulty breathing, or shallow, fast breathing



A faster heartbeat



Feeling dizzy or light-headed



Feeling tired

If you think you are experiencing any warning signs, it is always better to be safe than sorry! Take a rest and see whether you feel better.

If you have any doubt about whether you are approaching your limit, it's best to stop.

Rest

Rest is a key part of exercising safely, and of living well with fatigue in general. It may seem simple, but rest is not always as easy as it sounds.

A lot of things which we think of as rest aren't actually rest at all. Talking to friends, watching TV, or reading a book are **not rest** - they still use energy!

You should always try to work rest periods into anything you do. You could spend this time listening to music, practicing mindfulness or meditation, or lying in bed.



Rest can be surprisingly difficult, especially when you are already struggling to fit everything into your day - but it is also the single most important thing you can do to help your health.

Remember that mental and emotional work can have even more impact on your health than physical exercise!

If you feel tired at any point during the day, you should try where possible to take a rest break. This will help you to feel better in the moment, and also to avoid symptoms flare-ups in the future.



It can be difficult to find time for rest at work.

Always remember: your employer has a legal responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for your health. This includes scheduled rest breaks and reduced hours.

For more on adjustments at work, you can look at the Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland booklet **"Return to Work"**.

Choosing exercise

What exercise you do can make a lot of difference to how it affects your symptoms.

It is best to avoid **high-impact** exercises - ones which raise your heart rate and speed up your breathing.

You may also find it easier to do exercises which you can work into your daily routine. For example, you might find that walking or housework is the best way to work exercise into your day-to-day life.

Gentle stretches can be a good way to reduce deconditioning without causing a post-exertional exacerbation.



Getting help

You don't have to manage your exercise alone. Help and support is available.

You may want to ask your friends or family to accompany you when you exercise, or to keep an eye on your symptoms.

You can also ask your health professional to refer you to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist. These professionals may be able to support you in finding exercises which work for you.

Some local sports and fitness services may be able to provide exercise support. Ask your local sports centre for more information, or contact the CHSS Advice Line.



Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: adviceline@chss.org.uk.

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