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KEY POINTS

- Fatigue is the most common symptom of Long Covid, affecting at least six out of ten people.
- Fatigue is not just extreme tiredness - it causes a wide range of symptoms throughout the body.
- Long Covid fatigue is a type of post-viral fatigue, like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. There are many theories about why Long Covid causes fatigue, but no scientific consensus.
- Long Covid fatigue **should not** be managed by "pushing through", by graded exercise, or by pushing your limits. It should be dealt with through pacing and energy management.
- Long Covid fatigue may get better with time and careful management. Even if it does not, you can use energy management and pacing to live a full, happy life with fatigue.

This factsheet is only about fatigue caused by Long Covid. For information on managing fatigue in general, see the Essential Guide on "Tiredness and Fatigue".

Long Covid and fatigue

Fatigue - physical and mental exhaustion - is the most commonly reported symptom of Long Covid. Six out of every ten people with Long Covid report issues with fatigue or persistent tiredness.

Long Covid fatigue is not like normal tiredness, or even like some other forms of fatigue. It is most similar to the fatigue experienced by people who have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or fibromyalgia.

Fatigue happens when you have less energy available than your body is using. It is a condition which affects your whole body, and can cause:

- Tiredness and lack of energy, which does not go away when you sleep.
- Sleeping too much, or being unable to get to sleep properly.
- Headaches, body aches, and stiffness.
- Dizziness or unsteadiness, especially when standing up.
- The feeling of a weight pressing down on you, or of your limbs being very heavy.
- Difficulty with thinking, speech, or memory (for more details, see the factsheet on **Brain Fog**).
- Emotional instability - being easily upset, short-tempered, or feeling more stressed than usual. You may cry at unexpected times, or feel less able to emotionally cope with stressful situations.
- Nausea or sickness.
- Changes to your appetite, and/or changes to your weight.
- Reduced libido or difficulty having sex.
- Being more likely to develop illnesses or infections, such as colds or flu, and taking longer to recover from them. Wounds may also take longer to heal.

These changes can have a big impact on your day-to-day life, your mood, and your relationships with other people. For advice on managing the impact of these symptoms, see the Essential Guide on **Tiredness and Fatigue**.

What makes Long Covid fatigue different?

Long Covid fatigue is more systemic than fatigue with a physical cause (such as stroke, heart attack, or breathing problems). It can get better or worse without a clear reason, and you may not be able to tell why you are tired.

The most important difference is that **you cannot “push through” the fatigue caused by Long Covid**. Many other sorts of fatigue are improved by carefully building up how much you do, stretching your limits, and building up fitness. However, post-viral fatigue (including fatigue in Long Covid) is made worse by pushing your limits.

This means that you should **not** be taking part in “capacity-building” treatments like graded exercise. Instead, focus on pacing, managing your energy, and finding ways to live with your fatigue.

Why does Long Covid cause fatigue?

It is not entirely clear why Long Covid causes fatigue, or why it is so common. There are several theories.

- **The metabolism theory.** There is increasing evidence that people with Long Covid have inflammation (immune reactions) in various parts of the body even after the virus has cleared. This might affect the body's ability to process food into energy, especially in the muscles and the brain.
- **The persistent infection theory.** The Covid-19 virus may still be in your system. This means that your immune system may still be working to keep the virus in check, which uses a lot of energy. Think of how tired you are after a normal cough or cold. Some people think that Long Covid fatigue is the same thing, but over a longer period of time.
- **The system damage theory.** Covid-19 can affect your organs and nervous system. This might mean that your body has less ability to manage its usual functions, and is taking more energy to do so.
- **The oxygen theory.** Covid-19 has a lot of effects on the respiratory and circulatory systems - your lungs, your blood, and your heart. This may result in less oxygen reaching the cells in your body, meaning that they are less active.
- **The hormones theory.** We know that some hormones (such as thyroid hormones) can affect energy levels. Even in healthy people, the amount of energy you produce and use is different depending on the season, your environment, and even the time of day. These hormones might be affected by Long Covid, which would cause the body to go into a low-energy state at inappropriate times. (This may also explain why many people with Long Covid also suffer from insomnia and other sleep conditions).

The most likely cause of Long Covid fatigue is some combination of these theories, but research into the causes of Long Covid fatigue has not yet reached any definite conclusions.

Will it get better?

Since Long Covid has only been recognised as a condition for a short time, there is limited data on its long-term effects. However, we do know that some people recover over time from their fatigue. In one study, around 15 out of every 100 people who had severe fatigue found that three months later, they were less fatigued.

Even if your fatigue does not get better, you can learn to manage it through pacing and energy management. This can make it easier to do daily tasks, reduce the impact of your symptoms, and prevent "flare-ups" of symptoms.

To find out more about managing fatigue, see the **Tiredness and Fatigue** Essential Guide. CHSS also offers worksheets to help you with planning your activities, tracking your energy levels, and identifying triggers that may make things worse. You can view and download these worksheets at www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

Resources

Fatigue resources

ME Association

Web: www.meassociation.org.uk
Tel: **0344 576 5326**

A national charity for ME/CFS and Long Covid. Provides a wide range of information and support on fatigue, as well as other symptoms.

NHS Inform

Web: www.nhsinform.scot/long-term-effects-of-covid-19-long-covid/signs-and-symptoms/long-covid-fatigue/

The NHS Scotland information website's page on Long Covid fatigue.

Purely Pacing

Web: www.jenniejacques.com/post/purely-pacing

A very helpful blog article outlining how to pace and manage your energy while dealing with Long Covid fatigue.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

Web: www.rcot.co.uk/how-manage-post-viral-fatigue-after-covid-19-0

A thorough, expert guide to managing Long Covid fatigue, from specialist Occupational Therapists throughout the UK.

Long Covid resources

LongCovid.scot

Web: www.longcovid.scot/support

A central hub of organisations and charities which can provide help and information on Long Covid.

National Wellbeing Hub

Web: wellbeinghub.scot/resource/tips-for-managing-long-covid/

A central hub for self-management of Long Covid symptoms.

All of Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland's booklets and factsheets can be found online or ordered in print at www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

This includes the following relevant documents:

Tiredness and Fatigue Essential Guide

Long Covid Essential Guide

Life with Long Covid Essential Guide

Energy Mapping worksheet

Battery Tracker worksheet

You can also get personal support, information, and advice by calling our Advice Line on **0808 801 0899** or texting **ADVICE** to **66777**.

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You can also go to our website for information, advice and support: **www.chss.org.uk**

Find a range of easy-to-read booklets and factsheets at our resources hub:
www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub



Scan here to see all our resources!

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