

## **Post-COVID-19 advice for adults**

Some people who have had COVID-19 experience symptoms for some weeks after the initial illness. There is no simple explanation for these symptoms but they can include debilitating fatigue and sometimes pain, mental fog, dizziness, nausea and a range of other symptoms. These symptoms vary in severity on different days. Although post COVID-19 symptoms are poorly understood, similar patterns of symptoms occur with people who have fibromyalgia. It is possible that helpful advice to fibromyalgia sufferers will also be helpful for those with post COVID-19. Here are some tips.

### **Changing versus pacing**

People are often recommended to pace themselves. Pacing advice might be 'do just 80% of what you feel you are capable of doing.' The research evidence for pacing is mixed, the reason being that people easily over or under-estimate what they can do. Over-estimation leads to 'boom and bust' which is unhelpful.

Changing is a different form of pacing. The changing advice is 'don't do any one activity for too long, but change from doing one thing to doing something else.' The length of time doing any one thing varies. The more strenuous the activity and the more severe the illness, the shorter the time should be, but typically one should change an activity every 20-30 minutes. This means, for example, that instead of doing some gardening for 45 minutes, do gardening for 20 minutes, then do something else such as read a book or listen to music, and then go back to gardening. Go for two short walks rather than one long walk. Patients with fibromyalgia sometimes report that this 'little and often' advice is the one which gives the most benefit. You will, however, need to plan your day carefully. A good plan is to alternate doing more active things with doing less active, relaxing things. Although we recommend changing for recovery, the same idea has been suggested by others to improve work output (search for 'pomodoro technique').

Tip: Stop forcing yourself to do things. You can't force yourself better

### **Relaxation and stress avoidance**

Stress harms recovery from most forms of illness, whereas relaxation is helpful because it creates profound changes in the body. Find what causes you most stress during the day and see if you can avoid it. A 10-15 minute period of deep relaxation once or twice a day is helpful when practiced over the long term. The internet provides many examples of relaxation techniques. They all work and the best one is the one that suits you best, so make your own choice. We have provided one here but there are many very good ones online.

<https://www.psy.plymouth.ac.uk/research/mhyland/relaxationaudio.aspx>

Tip: Avoid situations that make you stressed. If you are a dolphin, don't swim with the sharks.

## **Being happy**

Happiness creates chemicals that aid health and promote recovery. Have within your daily schedule some 'me time,' when you do something just for yourself that makes you happy. Treat yourself. Your daily treat is your daily medicine. It may be doing some art or listening to music. It may be some really nice chocolate or sitting in the garden. Guided imagery is available through the internet as well as other happiness promoting exercises. Whatever it is, it will be unique to you, so we cannot tell you what it is. Work out for yourself what makes you happy and do it. It is not indulgence – it is medicine!

You may need to change and stop doing things which don't make you properly happy. Make sure you choose work that fits you rather than fitting yourself to the work you do.

Tip: do things that 'feel right.' This may mean changing the way you work or live.

## **Exercise**

Physical activity is important but there is a narrow therapeutic window for people who are ill – too much or too little is bad. It is probably best to start with simple gentle, relaxing exercises, and, as health improves, the level of exercise can be increased. Any increase should be very gradual. Different types and levels of exercise routine are available on the internet, but many everyday activities involve physical activity and are just as beneficial. Do something you find interesting – whether it is walking, birdwatching or gardening. Exercise will help you most if you enjoy it.

Tip: don't do it for too long. Exercise is a means to health not an end itself.

## **Eating**

The gut is a sensitive organ, full of nerves and connected to the emotional centre of the brain. Eating when stressed, eating shortly after or before exercise upsets how the gut functions, so try to eat when relaxed. Little and often is a rule that can also apply here – being hungry causes stress. Diet affects health. Have plenty of vegetables as this is the one aspect of diet that is consistently shown by research to be associated with good health. Avoid caffeine and other stimulants as well as too much sugar. Try to have a varied, interesting diet that you enjoy. Enjoyment of food is important. A happy gut makes a happy person, and a happy person makes a happy gut.

Tip: avoid extreme diets and going hungry. Sensible eating is all that is needed.

## **Managing symptoms**

Symptoms can be better or worse on different days. Some of this variation is simply due to the fact the body is an unstable state and it tends to oscillate. However, symptoms can also get worse because something unpleasant has happened or you have overdone it the day before. Doing too much creates boom and bust. You feel good one day, do too much and are flat on your back the next. Boom and bust should be avoided as far as possible. It takes time to get things right. Do nice things for short periods of time, and include a variety of exercise and rest in your daily routine with an overarching aim of creating happiness.

Tip: become your own expert. Everyone has a different route to recovery.

## **A bit of theory for those who want it**

Symptoms such as fatigue, pain, depression, anxiety, nausea and just feeling plain unwell exist because they have a function. They protect the body from harm. Collectively they can be described as stop signals. Stop signals are ways your body has of stopping you doing something. Sometimes the body's programming goes wrong, and that is what seems to be happening in post-COVID-19. The body is creating stop signals when none are needed. It is rather like the brakes of a car being locked on rather than a run down battery. Forcing yourself is not a good idea. But doing nice things little and often lets the brakes off gradually.

The good news is that body tends to sort its programming out by itself and most people with post-Covid-19 improve gradually over time. Improvement often takes a zigzag route, getting a little better and then worse again. There may be times when you feel that you are not getting better, but do not lose heart. Judge improvement over a matter of months rather than days. Once you start getting better, you know you are on the road to recovery. Keep the end goal of being healthy again in sight.

*The advice given in this document does not replace any advice given to you by your doctor and applies only to symptoms caused by post-COVID-19, and not to symptoms caused by other diseases. If you have symptoms that concern you or you develop new symptoms, it is important to get them checked out by your doctor.*

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