

**CORONAVIRUS**

Psychosocial Response Group

Coping with Coronavirus

**Fatigue**

## Introduction

This leaflet is one of a series about Coronavirus and mental health. The leaflets contain information about how the Coronavirus outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Coronavirus key facts:

- This is a widespread outbreak, not limited to one area
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in wintertime
- For some people who are older or have pre-existing physical health conditions It is likely to be more severe, and may even be fatal, whereas for others it may be a relatively mild condition

Whilst all of us are familiar with challenges in life, the Coronavirus outbreak and its consequences is a particularly difficult and stressful experience for everyone. Some people may have to cope with being unwell, looking after family members or dealing with loss and bereavement. Coming to terms with the consequences that the Coronavirus has had for you and those close to you can take some time. This leaflet focuses on coping with feeling extreme fatigue; others cover bereavement, depression and coping with worry and uncertainty.

## What might you expect following any virus?

Many people feel tired and exhausted after they have a virus. Some people just feel a bit more tired than usual. Whilst others feel exhausted and low much of the time, and find it hard to get back to normal levels of activity. Most of us will make a full recovery, but if you are still not back to your usual levels of energy, you feel very tired and low four months or more after you had the virus (or three months in children), then you may have post-viral fatigue.

## Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Some people may go on to develop Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), sometimes also called Myalgic Encephalitis (ME), this is a condition which affects people in different ways. The main symptom is persistent fatigue (tiredness) and exhaustion which can be severe and disabling. The symptoms can also include:

- Malaise – feeling unwell or ‘out of sorts’, especially after exercise
- Sleep problems
- Headaches
- Muscle pains
- Swollen glands
- Difficulties with concentration and memory

## Who is likely to be affected?

Anyone can be affected by CFS, but there may be common themes for those with persistent problems. We know there are both helpful and unhelpful ways to manage symptoms following a virus:

- Resting too much, for example spending most of the day in bed or doing very little, will lead to loss of fitness and muscle strength. When you try to resume normal activities you may find you cannot do as much as you expect to do. You then rest more, causing further loss of fitness in a vicious cycle.
- Sleeping for hours during the day can lead to general malaise and problems sleeping at night. This leads to more daytime fatigue and more resting, which causes more problems sleeping at night.
- Not allowing yourself time to recuperate and get better, such as going back to work too soon or resuming normal activities before you are fully well.

People who have very high standards, like to do things well and do not like to let other people down can push themselves very hard and do not allow themselves time to rest.

## The Boom and Bust Cycle

The 'Boom and Bust' Cycle is when people swing between extremes of doing too much and too little.

When very fatigued and unwell it makes sense that people change the way they do things.

Some may reduce the hours they work or stop altogether.

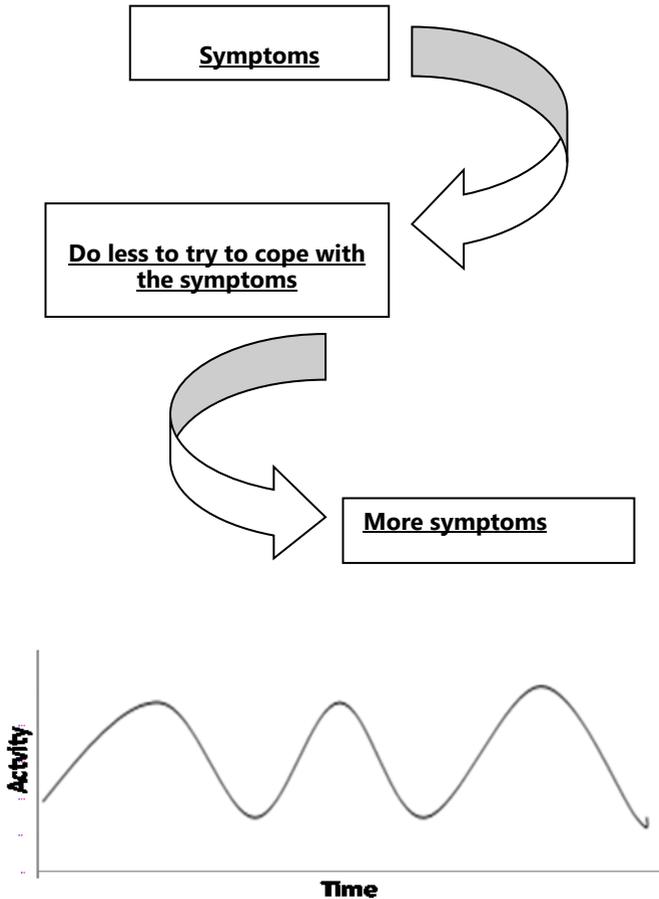
Others may do fewer enjoyable activities, particularly socialising and physical exercise: or avoid doing anything new and rest more during the day. Gradually, they can become less fit.

Resting may reduce the symptoms for a while. But then on days with fewer symptoms, it is very tempting to try to catch up by doing all the jobs and activities which you were unable to do on 'bad days'.

It is very easy to overdo it on 'good days'. Because you are de-conditioned you then feel more tired, unwell and are unable to do as much, therefore have to rest more.

This can become a 'Boom and Bust' pattern of activity which prevents your body from building up fitness.

Diagram of 'Boom and Bust' pattern of fluctuating activity over time:



This "over-activity and under-activity" cycle is a common pattern in many people with CFS/ME. It shows a downward spiral which results in further fatigue and wariness about your symptoms

Prolonged rest can result in weaker muscles and a drop-in fitness. Although the symptoms from over-activity subside, rest makes the body stiffer, painful and more tired.

The associated feelings of frustration cause despair and can leave you feeling as though you have no control over your condition.

## Improving symptoms of CFS

The main ways you can improve the management of chronic fatigue are:

1. Pacing and activity management
2. Graded exercise

## Pacing and activity management

Pacing and managing your activities is a good way of breaking the 'Boom and Bust' pattern we described above.

Make sure there is a good balance between times when you are active and times for resting. A daily diary of your activities and rest periods will help you to look at what you are doing.

Your 'Boom or Bust' pattern might include doing all your chores in the morning and then resting all afternoon, or, doing too much on your 'good' days, when you feel more energetic, then feeling too exhausted to do anything on your 'bad' days.

You may notice your life is unbalanced, either doing too much work and activity, or too much resting with very few pleasurable moments. See if it is possible to:

- Alternate mentally tiring activities with a short rest or a physical activity.
- See if you can do something which gives you pleasure and enjoyment, however small, such as listening to music or talking to a friend.
- Break up your activities into smaller chunks, and do these with short rest periods in between. A diary can be helpful (see example on next page).

## Example Diary:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Early Morning activity							
Rest							
Late Morning activity							
Lunch break							
Early afternoon activity							
Rest							
Late afternoon activity							
Evening Meal break							
Evening activity							
Bedtime							

## Gradually reducing rest and increasing activities

We know that resting too much makes CFS worse, but many people are very nervous about overdoing things and making themselves more unwell.

You may have experiences of trying to do more and feeling much worse for a few days afterwards. As a result, you may have a very limited range of activities.

Gradually reduce the length of your rests and gradually increase your activities. For example, if you are resting for three hours every afternoon gradually cut down this time by 15 minutes each week, until your rest is at a point where it does not interfere with your sleep during the night. This will also help you to do more in the day and feel you have a more satisfactory life.

## Improve your sleep

Reducing your daytime sleep is very helpful in improving your sleep at night. If you are continuing to have difficulties sleeping, the following may help:

- Go to bed and get up at a set time each day, regardless of how well you slept the night before.
- Avoid coffee, energy drinks, or too much alcohol
- Try and establish a bed-time routine, such as having a bath, reading or listening to music to help relax. Avoid electronic devices and phones before bed.
- Rather than lying awake worrying about not sleeping, get up and do something else for a while, such as reading or watching television, go back to bed only when you feel sleepy.
- If you have things on your mind or are worrying, write down what you are worrying about before you go to bed, put it to one side and remind yourself that you cannot solve any problems during the night and will tackle them the next day.

## Graded exercise

Graded exercise has been shown to be effective in reducing fatigue and getting back your fitness after CFS. When starting to exercise, it is very important to begin at a level which is less than you are capable of doing.

Many people with CFS are more physically unfit than they think they are and tend to try to do too much, leading to the Boom and Bust pattern of activities. I

If you start activity at too high a level, or even one which is equal to your present physical stamina, you may increase your symptoms and be tempted not to carry on with the exercise plan.

For this reason it is vitally important to start small and gradually build up. Pacing yourself is essential.

The exercise activities you choose will depend on the severity of your condition. They should be:

- Realistic and enjoyable
- Performed several times a day
- Performed every day - good days and bad - otherwise the benefits of the activity already gained by your body will be lost

The following activities are of varying physical intensity to do in the early stages of recovery. You may wish to choose a selection of gentle activities according to what is available and your individual needs. You don't need to join a gym to exercise, it is possible to exercise at home and when convenient to you.

- Standing
- Walking
- Stair exercises
- Using an exercise bicycle
- Yoga
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Keep fit type exercises

Walking or using a stationary exercise bike are both practical in the beginning stage. You could start with walking for five minutes twice a day, or pedaling on an exercise bike for two minutes twice a day. You gradually build up the time and intensity of exercise when you begin to improve.

## **CBT to help with difficulties in pacing activities**

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy which has been shown to be helpful for CFS/ME. It helps you to identify thoughts and beliefs which maintain the problems

CFS/ME may relate to longstanding problems such as depression, chronic worry, perfectionism or low self esteem. You can get some ideas on using CBT for yourself from the books mentioned below, or alternatively ask your GP for a referral to local CBT services

## Key points

- A period of feeling tired and run down after a virus is normal. Remember to give yourself time to recuperate
- Persisting symptoms, 'Boom and Bust' patterns of activity and sleep problems may be a sign that you are suffering from CFS
- Pacing, graded exercise and working on improving your sleep are all helpful in reducing symptoms and establishing more healthy and fulfilling patterns of activity and rest
- CBT can help you if you are experiencing difficulties in managing the recommended strategies, or if you have other, related problems such as worry

## Further information

Books to find out about CBT approaches and fatigue:

- Overcoming Chronic Fatigue 2nd edition: A self help guide using CBT (2019) by Mary Burgess
- Self Help for CFS: A Guide for Young People (2016) by Katherine Rimes & Trudie Chalder Publications
- Manage Your Mind (2018) by Gillian Butler, Nick Grey and Tony Hope

## Internet & other sources of information about mental health and wellbeing

- [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) – offers support to people who are despairing or suicidal
- Self-help leaflets by Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust: <https://web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>
- TalkingSpace Plus at [www.talkingspaceplus.org](http://www.talkingspaceplus.org) with lots of useful information about services in Oxfordshire and access to self referral to services for people suffering from mild to moderate anxiety , depression and stress
- Healthy Minds in Buckinghamshire: <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/healthyminds/>
- Oxfordshire Mind <https://www.oxfordshireremind.org.uk/> – provides information on all aspects of mental health
- Buckinghamshire Mind <https://www.bucksmind.org.uk/> provides information on all aspects of mental health

## About Coronavirus:

- Go to [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) or <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care/nhs-111/>
- Keep up to date through the TV or the radio

**If you would like to have information translated into a different language, please contact the Equality and Diversity Team at: [EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)**

**Arabic** يُرجى الاتصال بنا إذا كنتم ترغبون في الحصول على المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتسويق مختلف.

**Bengali** আপনি এই তথ্য অন্য ভাষায় বা আলাদা আকারে পেতে চাইলে অনুগ্রহ করে আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন।  
**Urdu** اگر آپ یہ معلومات دیگر زبان یا مختلف فارمیٹ میں چاہتے ہیں تو برائے مہربانی ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

**Chinese** 若要以其他語言或格式提供這些資訊，請與我們聯繫

**Polish** Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku lub w innym formacie, skontaktuj się z nami.

**Portuguese** Queira contactar-nos se pretender as informações noutra idioma ou num formato diferente.

Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust  
Trust Headquarters  
Warneford Hospital, Warneford Lane  
Headington, Oxford OX3 7JX

Switchboard 01865 901 000  
Email [EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)  
Website [www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](http://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)

**OHFT Psychosocial Response Group, 2020**

Become a member of our Foundation Trust  
[www.ohftnhs.uk/membership](http://www.ohftnhs.uk/membership)