

POST-VIRAL/CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME: Advice on Exercise and Setting Expectations



Whether you were a regular exercise junkie (before becoming ill) or if exercise is something new that you are that you are wanting to try to see if it helps with any symptoms of post viral of post-viral fatigue syndrome (PVFS) or chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), there are some things to remember. Firstly exercise is not a cure for PVFS/CFS but some people find it helpful even as a coping tool. Secondly you should always get guidance and advice from your physiotherapist or medical professional. And finally you must exercise at your own level within your energy limits.

1. NORMAL RESPONSE DURING EXERCISE

The following signs and feelings show you that you are working at the right level to make real positive changes to your body. If you do not feel any of these when exercising, you will not be benefitting.

- Increased breathing rate. This is to supply your muscles with more oxygen because they are working harder than usual.
- Increased heart rate. This pumps the extra oxygen around your body to provide for your muscles.
- Increased temperature. You will feel warmer as your muscles work harder and give off more heat.
- Body parts turning red in colour. This happens because the blood vessels close to the skin widen to allow more blood to flow through them, which helps keep you cool.

- Sweating. This is another way of helping to control your body temperature: as the sweat evaporates it cools you down.
- 'Jelly feeling'. Your arms or legs may feel a little shaky or like jelly. When you stop exercising this feeling should gradually go away.

2. NORMAL RESPONSE AFTER EXERCISING

After exercise, your heart and breathing rate will gradually slow down to their normal resting rates. You may also feel the following as part of a normal reaction after exercise:

- Heaviness feeling. After working hard, your muscles are likely to feel heavy.
- Muscle stiffness. This comes in varying degrees.
 - Mild stiffness is normal and is associated with positive changes and should not last long. A good warm-up and warm-down will help reduce this. Stiffness is caused by a build-up of lactic acid, a normal by-product of exercise. Lactic acid gradually gets washed out of your muscles after exercise by your bloodstream. You can help this process by having a long, warm bath followed by gentle stretching exercises. Gentle movement, eg. walking, can also help.
 - Moderate or intense stiffness of the muscles does not indicate harm to your body but, as it is uncomfortable, you may need to adjust your programme.

- Natural tiredness. Exercise will make you feel a normal and natural tiredness and will help improve sleep: this tiredness may feel more intense than usual in somebody with PVFS/CFS.

3. RARE ADVERSE REACTIONS TO EXERCISE

If you get any of these signs during exercise, stop exercising and discuss with your doctor:

- Breathing becoming out of control
- Wheezing
- Chest pains
- Collapse or faintness
- Injuries.

If you feel anything else that is making you feel uncomfortable during exercise be sure to discuss concerns further.

4. STRETCHING IS HELPFUL

Regular stretching will help to keep your muscles, ligaments and joints flexible and supple, which lets you move freely, without uncomfortable tightness. Muscles and ligaments can 'stiffen up' if you have been in one position for a long period of time, or if you have been generally less active than normal. Also, they can actually shrink in length, and may be uncomfortable or painful when they are pulled as part of normal every-day activity. However, with regular stretching, you will feel much more supple and your

muscles will feel more comfortable. Many people with PVFS/CFS report how much better they feel when they do regular stretching.

i. When Should I Stretch?

You will see improvements only if you stretch regularly. You might start by stretching just once a day, but work up to stretching frequently. It is useful to stretch at the following times:

- After a warm bath in the evenings: the warm water will soften your muscles and let you stretch a bit further more comfortably.
- If you are in one position for a long time, eg. at a computer, lying down, or sitting, it is important to stretch every half an hour or so.
- At regular opportunities during the day, eg. waiting for the kettle to boil, watching TV, a etc.
- Before and after any aerobic exercise or difficult physical activities, eg. walking, DIY, gardening.

ii. What Should Stretching Feel Like?

Many people report that they feel more comfortable and flexible after they have stretched, and often more relaxed. However, as you are stretching muscles that may be tightened, stretching may feel uncomfortable at the time of the exercise. Stretches should not lead to pain that stays with you for a long time after the stretch. If you find this, please consult your physiotherapist who can alter the stretch.

iii. Where Should I Start?

- At first, stretch gently, slowly and smoothly. As your body becomes more supple, you will find you can stretch further.
- Start by holding your stretches for as long as feels comfortable (maybe 2–5 seconds), with the view of eventually working up towards 20 seconds. You might start by just doing one of each stretch, and then work this up gradually.

- Over time these stretches will become easier.
- Never 'bounce' when stretching. Stretches should always be slow, smooth and sustained.

5. WHY DO STRENGTHENING EXERCISES?

As well as your body being generally physically fitter, muscles also need to be strong to enable you to do physical activities during the day. If you have had prolonged bedrest, muscle wasting may have occurred leaving you weaker than before. It takes muscle strength to climb the stairs, for example, or to wash your hair or do gardening tasks at home. It is also important to strengthen muscles if you are re-starting exercise or trying a new activity or sport, so that you are strong enough to do it. In essence: stronger muscles will let you do more of the things you want to do.

i. How Often Should I Do Strengthening Exercises?

It is best to try to work up to do strengthening exercises daily if you can. However, you might start by doing them every second day to start with. It is better to do fewer repetitions more regularly than to do a long session all at once.

ii. Where Should I Begin?

It is probably best to start with a low number of repetitions and then build up slowly, in the same way as you have increased your aerobic exercise. Ask your physical therapist for guidance on repetitions and specific exercises to perform.

iii. When Should I Do Strengthening Exercises?

You can choose whether you would like to do them all in one session (with maybe some rest breaks in between), or spread out through the day.

iv. What Should Muscle Strengthening Feel Like?

Doing a strengthening exercise is likely to feel quite hard, and the muscles might feel 'heavy' or like 'jelly'. This is when the muscle sends a message to the brain to build more muscle fibres and make you stronger. As with stretches, although strengthening exercises may feel uncomfortable at the time, they should not give you sharp pain or pain that gets worse over time.

6. STAYING MOTIVATED

Staying motivated may be more of a challenge than the exercise itself. Small improvements are hard to see but the tips below will help you track your achievement. Different things motivate different people. For some, the most satisfaction comes from seeing themselves achieve their goals; for others, they may enjoy telling others about their progress.

- Keep a written plan at all times.
- Write down details of your exercise or physical activity achievements.
- Keep lists of plans and tick them off once you have done them.
- Keep a diary outlining all the things you learn from your exercise programme.
- Tell friends and family about your plans and progress.
- Reward yourself when you have stuck to your plans, eg. putting some money aside every time you undertake your plan and save for something special.
- Frequently go over your written plans and old exercise sheets and see the progress you have made.
- Draw a graph of the progress you are making so that you can see your exercise time going up.
- Exercise with other people: walking at lunchtime with a colleague can be more motivating than going out alone.
- Join a club or gym, if advised, so that you can become committed to your plans and enjoy them with others, eg. sports club or team, gardening group or walking group.

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