

# COPING WITH THE FLU OUTBREAK

## FATIGUE

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**NHS**

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## INTRODUCTION

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

Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and which spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world. Its key features are:

- It affects the whole world, not just one area.
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in winter time.
- It may affect two or three times as many people as ordinary flu – perhaps around one quarter of the population.
- It is likely to be more severe, and hence cause more serious illnesses and deaths.
- It may affect any age group rather than being a threat mainly to the very old and the very young.

Whilst all of us are familiar with a degree of adversity in life, the flu outbreak and its consequences is a particularly difficult and stressful experience for everyone, and 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 flu has had for you and those close to you can take some time.

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This leaflet focuses on coping with feeling extreme fatigue; others cover bereavement, depression and coping with worry and uncertainty.

## What might you expect following a viral infection?

Many people feel tired and exhausted after they have had a viral infection. 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, and you feel very tired and low, four months or more after you had the flu (or three months in children), then you may be suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS).

## Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)

CFS, also known as Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome or Myalgic Encephalitis (ME), is a condition which affects people in different ways. The main symptom is persistent fatigue 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

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## 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 that 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 then try to resume normal activities, you may find that you cannot do as much as you expect to do, and 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 in turn leads to more daytime fatigue and more resting, in a vicious circle.
- 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

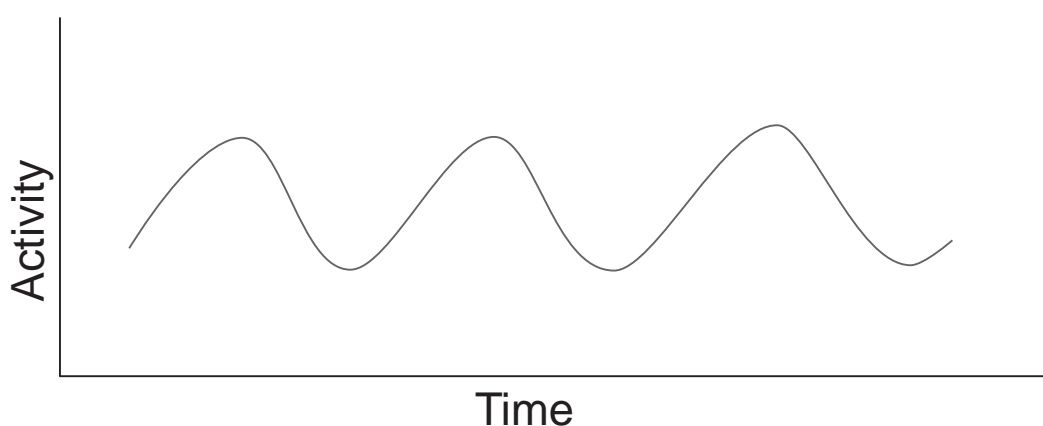
The 'boom and bust' cycle is when people swing between extremes of doing too much and doing too little. When very fatigued and unwell, it makes sense that people change

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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. Others 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 and unwell and are unable to do as much, and 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

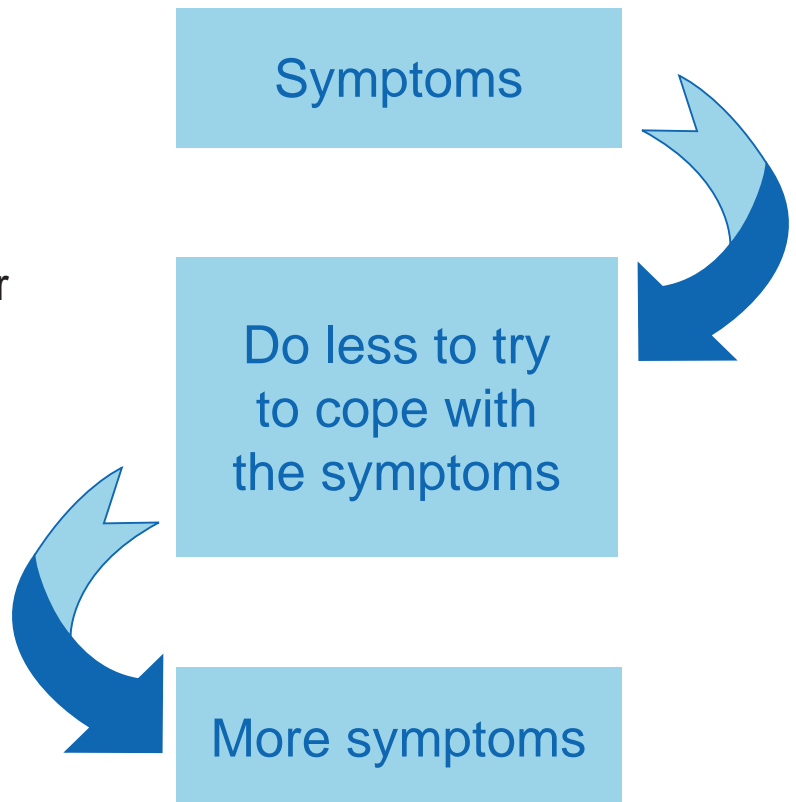


See a further graph overleaf.

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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.



### Recovering from CFS

There are three main ways in which you can get better and resume your normal life:

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1. Pacing and activity management
2. Graded exercise
3. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to help deal with problems with pacing yourself

## *Pacing and activity management*

Pacing and managing your activities is a good way of breaking the 'boom and bust' pattern we described before. 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 that your life is unbalanced, either doing too much work and activity, or too much resting, with very few pleasurable moments.

- 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 the next page).

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## Example diary

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Early morning activity							
Rest time							
Late morning activity							
Lunch break							
Early afternoon activity							
Rest time							
Late afternoon activity							
Evening meal break							
Evening activity							
Bed time							

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## *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 or too much alcohol in the evenings.
- Try and establish a bed-time routine, such as reading or listening to music to help relax.

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- Rather than lying awake worrying about not sleeping, get up and do something else for a while, such as reading or watching television, and 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 on 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. 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 for success.

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

- Realistic and enjoyable
- Performed several times a day

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- 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 your individual needs:

- Standing
- Stair exercises
- Yoga
- Swimming
- Walking
- Using an exercise bicycle
- Dancing
- 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 pedalling on an exercise bike for two minutes twice a day, and gradually build up the time and intensity of exercise when you begin to improve.

## *CBT to help with difficulties in pacing and recovery*

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, and gradually test out ways of changing these. CFS/ME may relate to long-standing problems such as depression, chronic worry, perfectionism or low self esteem.

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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 flu 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.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

### *Books to find out about CBT approaches and fatigue*

- Overcoming Chronic Fatigue (2005) by Mary Burgess and Trudie Chalder, published by Constable Robinson.
- Self Help for CFS: A Guide for Young People (2002) by Trudie Chalder and Kaneez Hussain, published by Blue Stallion Publications.
- Manage your Mind (2007) by Gillian Butler and Tony Hope, published by Oxford University Press.

### *Further information about the flu*

- Go to [www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu) and/or [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)
- Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647
- Pick up leaflets from doctor's surgeries and other places.

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## Other leaflets in this series:

- Bereavement (PB 246.09)
- Depression (PB 247.09)
- Recovering from Trauma (PB 249.09)
- Worry and Uncertainty (PB 250.09)

This and the other leaflets in this series can be found on the Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust's website:  
[www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk](http://www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk)

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