

How to conserve your energy

Practical advice for people during and after having COVID-19

When you are ill or recovering from an illness, you are likely to have less energy and feel tired. A simple task, such as putting on your shoes, can feel like hard work. This guide will help you to find ways to conserve your energy as you go about your daily tasks. By making these small changes you'll have more energy throughout the day.

The 3 Ps principle (Pace, Plan and Prioritise)

Learning to pace, plan and prioritise your daily activities will help you to save energy.

Pace

Pacing yourself will help you have enough energy to complete an activity. You'll recover faster if you work on a task until you are tired rather than exhausted. The alternative, doing something until you're exhausted, or going for the big push, means that you'll need longer to recover.

Example: climbing stairs

| The pacing approach ✓ | The big push approach ✗ |
|---|--|
| Climb five steps, rest for 30 seconds and repeat. You won't need a long rest at the top and won't feel so tired the next day. | Climb all the stairs at once. You'll have to rest for 10 minutes at the top, and feel achy and tired the next day. |

Top tips:

- Break activities up into smaller tasks and spread them throughout the day.
- Build rests into your activities, it's key to recharging your energy.
- Plan 30–40 minutes of rest breaks between activities.
- Sit and rest wherever possible.

Plan

Look at the activities you normally do on a daily and weekly basis, and develop a plan for how you can spread these activities out. If certain activities make you breathless or fatigued, rather than do them in one go, plan ahead to do them throughout the day. Change the time of an activity: instead of having a bath or shower in the morning when you are busy, have one in the evening. Do weekly activities such as gardening, laundry and food shopping on different days, with rest days in between.

Top tips:

- Collect all the items you need before you start a task.
- Specially adapted equipment is likely to make tasks easier. If you have an occupational therapist, ask them for further advice and support.
- You may get more done when family or friends are visiting and can help you.

Prioritise

Some daily activities are necessary, but others aren't. Ask yourself the following questions to find out which of yours are necessary:

- What do I need to do today? What do I want to do today?
- What can be put off until another day?
- What can I ask someone else to do for me?

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Top energy conserving tips:

- Don't hold your breath during any task.
- Try to avoid pulling, lifting, bending, reaching and twisting where possible.
- Push or slide items as much as possible, rather than lifting them.
- Bend with your knees rather than from your waist.

Practical tips for different activities of daily living

Washing and grooming

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sit to wash your face, brush your teeth and dry your hair. Have rests after each.• Pat yourself dry rather than rubbing. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep all the things you will need in the same place.• Put a mirror at face level when sitting.• Liquid soap lathers more quickly than a bar.• Use long-handled equipment, such as a long-handled sponge. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try dry shampoo.• Use electrical items, such as a toothbrush and razor etc. |

Bathing and showering

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow plenty of time and take rests.• Sit in the shower if possible. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open an inside door to allow good ventilation.• Use long-handled equipment.• Equipment can help you get in and out of the bath or shower, such as a rail or chair. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is bathing an activity you enjoy and are willing to spend a lot of energy on?• Is a daily bath or shower necessary?• Can you have a strip wash at the sink instead during your early recovery? |

Dressing

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sit to dress.• Break up tiring tasks with easy ones and take rests.• Dress your lower half first, when you have the most energy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collect all your clothes before you start.• Wear clothes that fasten at the front and are loose.• Put pants and trousers on at the same time and then pull them up together.• Put skirts on over your head.• Sit down to put on shoes and socks. Lift and cross one leg onto your knee to bring your foot closer. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you rearrange your wardrobe and drawers so that all your clothes are close together?• Can a member of your household get your clothes out and help you get dressed? |

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Making the bed

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Put on the sheet, stop for a rest, then the pillowcases, then rest again.• Sit for some of the task, such as doing the pillows.• Get help with the duvet cover. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have your bed positioned so that you can walk all the way around it.• Start and finish one side, then move to the other so you only circle the bed once. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you take turns with someone you live, or can they make the bed instead? |

Cooking

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spread the preparation throughout the day. Peel vegetables in the morning, cook in the afternoon and reheat in the evening.• Sit to prepare food or when waiting to stir.• Take rests during and after cooking. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cook large amounts and refrigerate or freeze extra portions.• Get everything you need ready before you start.• Find recipes with a short preparation time.• Use a trolley to move cooking equipment or cutlery for the table. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Buy frozen ready meals for days when you are very tired.• Can a member of your household cook for you? |

Shopping

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a rest when you get to the shop.• Take your time collecting your items.• Put heavy items in different bags.• Use a trolley to push your shopping home rather than carrying a bag. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make a list that follows the aisles and means you only need to visit one or two shops.• Shop at quieter times.• Avoid large/deep trolleys to reduce bending when putting in and removing items.• Pack items together that go in the fridge/freezer or same cupboard, so it is easier to unpack. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can a member of your family help?• Can you do online shopping? |

Laundry

| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spread the tasks throughout the day. Load the machine in the morning, empty in the afternoon.• Sit down to iron.• Use a low clothes horse and sit to hang out washing.• Take rests during and afterwards. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wear clothes that wash, dry and iron easily.• Do several smaller loads each week, rather than one large wash.• Store everything you need in one place, such as powder and pegs.• Use a laundry basket on wheels.• If possible, have your dryer at chest height. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is it necessary to iron all of your clothes?• Can someone help you fold large or heavy items, such as sheets and towels?• Can someone else do the laundry? |

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| Housework | | |
|--|--|---|
| Pace | Plan | Prioritise |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spread heavy activities throughout the week. For example, Hoover a different room each day.• Do a mix of heavy and light activities in a day.• Have rest during and between activities.• Sit down for tasks like polishing or washing up. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collect all the items you need before you start.• Use long-handled equipment where possible.• Use a mop to clean floor spills rather than bending over.• Allow washing-up to air dry.• Use small rubbish bags so you don't have to lift one heavy bag. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can someone else do the heavy activities instead? |

Questions and answers

How quickly will I be able to do normal activities?

As COVID-19 is a new illness, we are still learning about how people will recover from it. How quickly you are able to get back to doing daily activities will vary from person to person. It will depend on things like how sick you were, whether you went into hospital and whether you were in intensive care or a high dependency setting.

When can I return to work?

People will feel able to return to work at different times, it will depend on your recovery and what your job is. Try not to rush, people who return to work too early can end up having to take time off sick again, which can have a knock-on effect on your confidence and self-esteem. A phased return works best, you'll need to plan this with your manager and, if you have one, your occupational health department. The 3 Ps principle will continue to help you when you return to work.

When can I resume sexual activities?

When you feel ready. Resume gently and consider positions that you may find more comfortable and less energy consuming. Remember, you should continue to follow government guidance on social distancing.

Do these techniques work?

Whilst the long-term effects of COVID-19 aren't yet known, these techniques do help people with long-term conditions and recovery from other illnesses. Studies of people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, such as emphysema, found that using these techniques helped reduce breathlessness during some activities. In a survey of people with long-term conditions, most said that they used these techniques to conserve energy and help manage their fatigue.

This guide is produced by the Critical Care Forum, Royal College of Occupational Therapists Specialist Section – Trauma and Musculoskeletal Health in partnership with the Yorkshire Fatigue Clinic.

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