

How to manage your energy levels

Practical advice for people recovering from illness or managing long-term health conditions



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Introduction

This guide is for people who have fatigue due to an illness or long-term condition. It aims to help people manage their energy as best as they can, so they can do more with their time more easily.

Everyone's experience of fatigue is unique and can have different causes; that's why it's difficult to define. Fatigue involves a lack of physical and/or mental energy that affects usual and desired activities.ⁱ If you don't know why you have fatigue, speak to a health professional in your GP surgery. You may feel pressure to resume your usual activities quickly but give yourself time and don't rush.

It's common to have low energy and feel more tired than usual when you're unwell, recovering from an illness, or managing a long-term condition. Even simple tasks, such as putting on shoes, can be hard work, which can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation and anger that then contribute to fatigue. It's useful to understand these things so you can seek medical advice if needed.

This guide was written by occupational therapists with professional expertise and lived experience in fatigue management, with input from patients and the public.

Resting your body and mind

When you add good quality rest to your daily routine, it can support your health and help with recovery from activities. This guide frequently refers to rest.

Resting your body can include seated activities like watching TV, using your phone or socialising, but even these activities use energy and concentration. To rest fully, sometimes you'll need to change what you're doing.

Resting your mind is as important as resting your body, because the brain uses a lot of energy. When thinking about quality rest, look at approaches that also relax the mind.

There are lots of resources available around rest. You may need to learn new techniques – look for approaches that suit you. Techniques include:

- breathing exercises
- mindfulness
- muscular relaxation
- calming sensations such as heat or cold, gentle movement or music.

Learn to practise rest as a positive action to help your energy. To help pace yourself, you can plan rest into the day for before and after activities.

Finding support

If possible, ask for help from others, and accept help when offered.

- Be clear about what help would save you the most energy, so people know how best to support you.
- It may take time to work out what's most useful for others to do and easier to do yourself – be patient when finding this out.
- Remind others that chatting while they help might be tiring for you.
- Consider if you can pay for assistance (such as cleaning) or if you have access to voluntary services.
- See if there are any local groups where you can ask for help – check on social media. Having a regular routine will save you from having to ask again.
- If you're an unpaid carer and need support, contact your local social services and ask for a carer's assessment – this looks at how being a carer affects your life and what your needs are.

Monitoring your energy levels

It's helpful to keep a record of how you feel throughout the day and what activities you've been doing, including when you're resting – you may see patterns of when you have the most or least energy and what activities take the most energy. You can use this information when planning your day. To do this you can:

- write your records in a standard diary, or search online for 'fatigue diary' for specific examples you can use
- use your own words to describe how you feel, or you might find it useful to give your energy levels a score out of 10 each time, so you can compare how you're feeling throughout the day and week – the levels of energy people experience will be different for everyone.
- use a colour coding system if it's too tiring to write down every individual activity. Red can be used to show activities that are most demanding, green for activities that are least demanding and amber for those in between.

The 3 Ps principle (Pace, Plan and Prioritise)

Learning to pace, plan and prioritise your daily activities can help you to save energy. If you use this approach with everything that you do, you can adapt and adopt new ways of doing familiar everyday activities.

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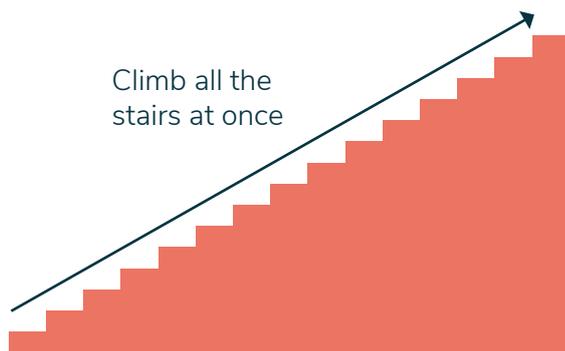
Pace

Pacing – top tips

- Break activities up into smaller tasks and spread them throughout the day.
- Try adjusting different parts of an activity to reduce the energy demands.
- Build rests into your activities; they're key to recharging your energy.
- Stop, pause and rest between activities where possible.
- Sit and rest wherever possible.

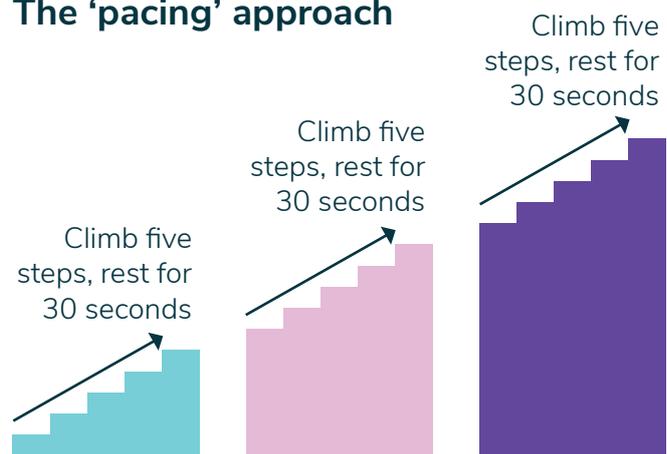
Break activities up into smaller tasks, or separate parts, as illustrated by the diagram below – you can also do this to space multiple activities across a day or week. Evidence suggests that pacing helps people with long-term fatiguing conditions manage their energy and maintain activities.ⁱⁱ Below is an example of pacing when climbing the stairs.

The 'big push' approach



Result: You have to rest for 10 minutes at the top and feel achy and tired the next day.

The 'pacing' approach



Result: You don't need a long rest at the top and don't feel so tired the next day.

It's best to stop for a break before you reach exhaustion. This'll be at different times for different people – you may feel it during the activity, later that day, or even the next day. Use your diary to record how you cope with each activity and any effects that you notice. Experiment to figure out how long you should continue before a break.

Resting 'little and often' tends to be the best approach.

When pacing, be aware of the different demands that activities put on you, such as:

- physical demands – moving, standing, reaching.
- thinking/mental demands – concentrating, remembering, understanding information, speaking, reading, writing.
- sensory demands – noise, light, temperature.
- emotional demands – excitement, stress, upset, fear, sadness

Also consider:

- environment – home, work, school, on transport
- complexity – is it difficult or easy, new to you or well-known? Can it be simplified?
- speed – how quickly do you do it? Can this be changed?

Consider all the potential demands of an activity, including the mental or sensory demands, as these affect the effectiveness of pacing. When you understand them, you can think about which ones you're able to change or influence, and how to best do so. This will vary for each person and activity.

If you take breaks regularly from thinking/mental work but don't change your posture during the breaks, physically the demand is continuous. An example of this is if you work at a computer – take regular screen breaks where you can change your position and rest your eyes.

Some people don't need to rest between each activity but find it helps to switch between different types of activity. An example of this is changing from a very physically demanding activity like vacuuming to a thinking/mental activity such as reading.

Be aware of your speed; going faster tends to use your energy more quickly.



You can simplify or reduce the demands of activities.

- For example, using assistive equipment such as a long-handled sponge for washing so that you don't have to bend.

Look at the section 'Practical tips' for activities of daily living, at the end of this guide, for ideas you might find useful. If you have an occupational therapist, ask them for advice and support. If not, you may be able to self-refer to your local council for larger pieces of equipment. Look online for disability equipment advice from charities or visit local disability equipment shops.

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Plan

Planning – top tips

- Plan ahead as much as possible.
- Create routines.
- Spread activities out.
- Keep items you need together and in easy reach.
- Look for equipment to reduce effort.
- Measure and track your energy use.

Weekly planners help with managing energy, not just time. Planning ahead can be helpful but also demanding.

- Find a quiet moment when you can take your time and take regular breaks. You don't have to do it all in one go.
- Use the plan for one day as a template for other days – our bodies prefer routine, such as waking up, eating and going to bed at similar times each day.

Routines and plans are there to help, not to be restrictive – see them as something you can adjust as your needs change.

- List your normal daily and weekly activities.
- Think about how demanding they are and in what way.
- Look back at your record or diary if you've kept one.
- Spread out the activities that you find most tiring and give yourself time to rest before and afterwards. Where possible, do heavier/harder weekly activities on different days with rest days in between.
- Remember that due to pacing, activities may be split up and need to be given more time.
- Notice your patterns – if you find your energy is lower, or concentrating is harder, at certain times of day, plan to avoid more demanding activities then. For example, instead of showering in the morning, when you're busy or more tired, do it in the evening.
- Don't try and do activities all in one go – plan breaks or changes to your activity. For example, plan to have a break from cooking or gardening by sitting down and doing a mental/thinking activity like using your phone.
- Communicate – tell others about your plans so they know you need to plan your time this way.

You can plan individual activities too.

- Think about ways you can do activities differently to use your energy differently. For example, instead of lifting and carrying items when cooking, try pushing and sliding them across the work surface.
- Try to group activities or tasks that are local to each other. For example, if the library is close to the pharmacy, can you plan to do both on the same trip, remembering to take a rest break in between?

Look for assistive equipment that will reduce the demands on your energy. If you have an occupational therapist, ask them for advice and support. If not, you may be able to self-refer to your local council for larger pieces of equipment. Look online for disability equipment advice from charities or visit local disability equipment shops. Look at the section 'Practical tips' for activities of daily living, at the end of this guide, for ideas you might find useful.

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Prioritise

Prioritising – top tips

- Be kind to yourself and don't try to do everything.
- Create a balance of activities you need and want to do.
- Delegate or drop tasks if you can.
- Look for activities that make you feel energised.

With limited energy, you need to choose carefully how you use it. This means making clear decisions about what your priorities are.

- Have a balance of activities between what you need to do, like caring for others or eating well, and things you want to do for fun and enjoyment.

Some daily activities are necessary for you to do, but others aren't. There might be some tasks you usually do that you can stop altogether, do less often, or ask/employ someone else to do for you.

Prioritise your day. Ask yourself:

- 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?
- what activities help me feel energised?

Learn to say no.

It can be difficult to manage the pressure to be active, whether from others or yourself. It's important to set boundaries so you can prioritise your health – to do this, sometimes you need to say no. This can be hard if you don't want to let someone down or miss out but is an important part of managing your energy levels.

- Identify what's important to you and acknowledge what's less important.
- If you know where you want to focus your time and energy, you can identify when to say no.
- Be confident when saying no and appreciative – if people ask you to do something, they're doing so because they trust and believe in your abilities or want to spend time with you.
- Say no to the request, not the person asking, and explain why. You may want to explain about managing your energy and why you need to say no.

Some of us find it hard to say no because we don't want to miss an opportunity. Remember that by saying no to one thing, you are saying yes to something else that you value more.

Applying the 3 Ps principle (Pace, Plan and Prioritise)

Work

Communicating with your employers about your needs will be important. Whether you can work will depend on the cause of your fatigue and the demands of your job.

If you've had time off work, a phased return works best. You'll need to plan this with your employer and, if you have one, your occupational health department. People feel able to return to work at different times, depending on their recovery and what their job is.

Use the 3 Ps principle to manage your energy, rather than doing too much too soon. Plan and prepare your day, when you can rest, delegate tasks, vary or reduce your activity levels.

Sport or leisure activities

Most sports and leisure activities are very demanding of energy. Initially, you may need to adjust your expectations. Try different things to before, where you can continue to find fun. They may be lower energy but still use movement/exercise. Consider how to reduce the demands of the activity. Can you sit instead of stand when you're exercising, or use a stool for gardening?

Start at a very low level, take regular rest and recovery breaks. If and when you're able, begin to gradually build up how much you do and think abouts how this affects you. Remember that you might not feel the effects immediately. Even if you can't increase your activity, by using planning and pacing you can keep active at a level that works for you. Use online resources if you're not able to get out to activities. If you're part of a team or interest group, talk to them about your needs and how they might be able to help you.

Social life

Social needs are important but should be balanced with the other demands on your energy. Plan social time within the week, or with other activities if possible. Consider the length and type of any social activity and how much energy it will demand of you. For example, a busy café with a big group versus a quiet visit at home with fewer people. Talk to your friends and explain what and how much you can do and how they can support you.

Sex

Sex, like many activities, can be paced, planned and prioritised. Decide what will suit you, consider approaches and positions that you may find more comfortable and less energy-consuming. Using sex aids might be helpful and remember to take rests. Communicate with your sexual partner about your energy needs.

After surgery or a shorter-term illness

Energy management approaches may be part of your recovery after surgery or a shorter-term illness. Over time you may not need to use them any more as your energy levels improve and you recover. People with long-term conditions may need to continue to use the 3 Ps principles. The approach can be adapted over time depending on your energy levels, stopped or re-introduced as needed.

This guide replaces the 2020 version on **How to conserve your energy: practical advice for people during and after having COVID-19**. It has been updated after further consultation with patients, the public and professionals.

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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 need in the same place. • Put a mirror at face level when sitting. • Use liquid soap instead of 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, 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. • Rest in a dressing gown or large towel rather than drying. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open an inside door to allow good ventilation. • Use long-handled equipment. • Use equipment to 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?
Dressing		
Pace	Plan	Prioritise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit to dress. • Break up tiring tasks with easy ones and take breaks. • Dress your lower half first when you have the most energy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rearrange your bedroom so the items you use most are easy to reach. • Collect all your clothes before you start. • Wear clothes that fasten at the front and are loose. • Put underwear and trousers on at the same time and then pull them up together. • Put skirts on over your head. • Sit down to put on socks and shoes. Lift and cross one leg onto your knee to bring your foot closer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rearrange your wardrobe and drawers so that all your clothes are close together. • Put clothing in groups of colour to make them easier to find. • Get your clothes out the night before. • If you have someone who can help, could they get your clothes out and help you get dressed?

Making the bed		
Pace	Plan	Prioritise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put on the sheet, stop for a rest, then the pillowcase, then rest again. Sit for some of the tasks, such as doing the pillows. If you can, get help with the duvet cover. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have your bed positioned so that you can walk all 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"> Could someone help you by making the bed? Can you do different parts on different days?
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 regularly for short periods whilst preparing or stirring food. Take rests during and after cooking. Use a trolley to move cooking equipment or cutlery to the table. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cook large amounts and refrigerate or freeze extra portions. Get everything you need ready before you start. Keep things that are used together/most often in the same part of the kitchen and near waist height, so you aren't bending and reaching. Cook simple meals without too much preparation or cooking time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Buy pre-prepared vegetables. Buy frozen ready meals. If able, could family or a friend prepare some meals? Prepare and eat your main meal at lunchtime
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. Spread heavy items across shopping bags. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a list with similar items together, such as milk and yoghurt together, so that you walk around the supermarket less. 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 the same cupboard so it's easier to unpack. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can family or a friend help you with the shopping? Can you do online shopping? Can you shop on a day when you don't have other heavy tasks to do?

Laundry		
Pace	Plan	Prioritise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread the tasks throughout the day. Load the machine in the morning, empty it 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, such as powder and pegs, in one place. • 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 your clothes? • Do you need to fold all your towels and sheets? • Consider the use of products such as crease releaser sprays.
Housework		
Pace	Plan	Prioritise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread heavy activities throughout the week. For example, vacuum a different room, or part of a room, each day. • Do a mix of heavy and light activities in a day. • Have a 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 you ask a friend or family member to help you or pay for someone to do this for you? • Prioritise the main rooms which are used and clean others less frequently. • Clean one room, or part of a room, at a time and not the whole house at once.

References

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