

Returning to Physical Activity

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Have you been told that you're "just deconditioned"?

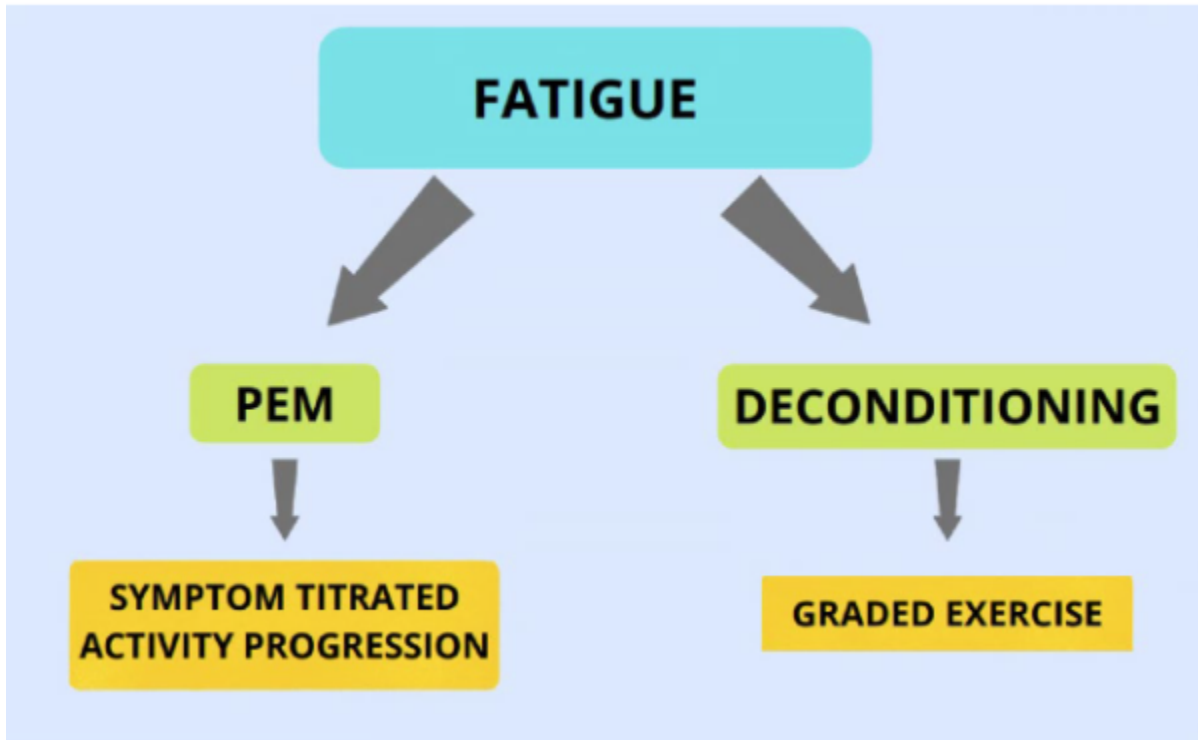
This is a common misconception with long COVID. Many people believe that the fatigue and disability experienced by those with long COVID is simply a result of deconditioning or inactivity.

However, the fatigue that comes with long COVID is a result of physiological changes to the body. Long COVID is characterized by [Post-Exertional Malaise](#), or PEM, which is a condition where over-exertion results in worsening fatigue and symptoms (you can learn more about PEM [here](#)).

For those with long COVID, traditional graded exercise programs should be avoided. Graded exercise programs involve progressively increasing exercise time or difficulty week after week and pushing oneself to achieve this. These programs are typically prescribed to help people recover from deconditioning. **However, graded exercise**

programs will typically trigger long COVID symptoms and make fatigue worse. Therefore, this approach should be avoided.

Instead, an approach called symptom **titrated activity progression** is typically recommended. This will be reviewed in more detail later in this section.



The first steps to getting back to the physical activities you enjoy

With long COVID, **you must find your energy envelope first** (please see [Pacing](#) in *MyGuide* for an explanation of your energy envelope). If you are currently struggling with a pattern of some good days and some bad

days, or feel you are often “crashing”, you are not ready for activity progression.

It’s crucial to your recovery to learn to manage your symptoms with your current energy levels, while doing the activities you absolutely need to do, before attempting to increase your physical activity.

Trying to increase your activity levels before you have found this stability will most likely cause post-exertional malaise.

That severe fatigue and increase in your overall symptoms will typically force you to rest and then you will have to start over once you recover. Continuing to repeat that pattern - the **push/crash cycle** - will almost certainly delay your recovery.



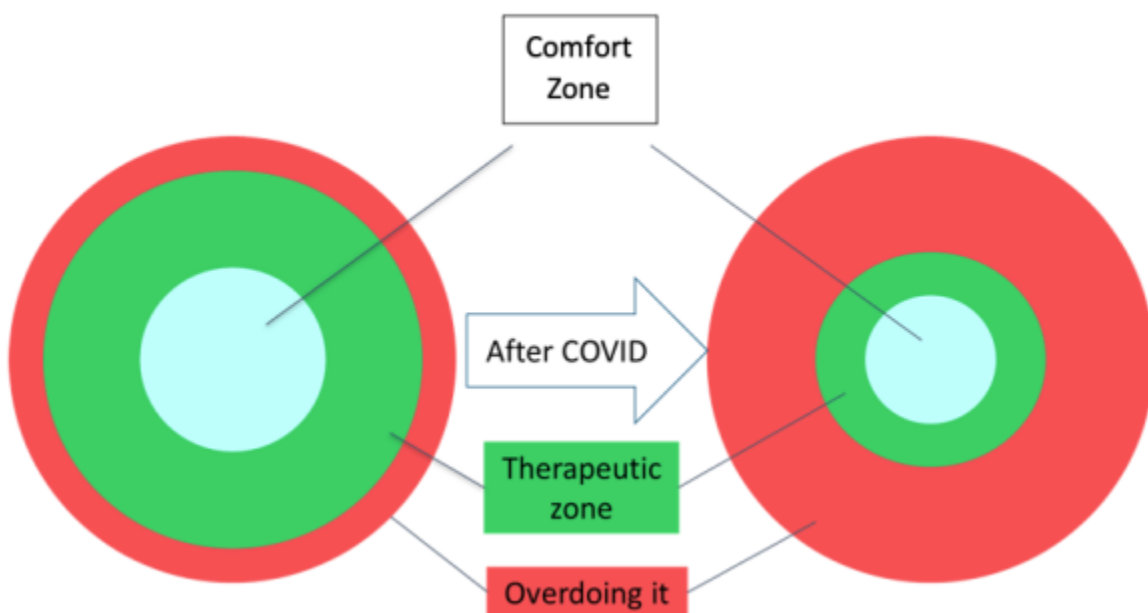
However, your mental health is important too, and being able to participate in some portion of these activities can be beneficial in that regard. If this is the case for you, think about what you value about the activity and try to adapt it to fit your current energy level.

For example, if you love hiking, perhaps it is important for you to connect with nature. If so, make sure you get a little fresh air daily and consider if

a short, slow walk, or sitting in a local park with a friend may be something you enjoy that fits within your energy envelope.

Safely progressing to physical activity

With long COVID, you can think of activity progression as expanding your energy envelope. To visualize this, you can use this picture of activity zones.



The left side of the figure shows what your activity zones typically looked like before you developed long COVID. The right side shows after.

- Activities you can do very easily are in the **comfort zone** (blue colour).
- Activities that are a bit more challenging fit in the **therapeutic zone** (green colour).
- And activities that are overwhelming or too difficult fit in the **overdoing it** zone (red colour).

With long COVID, you have likely noticed that activities that used to fit within your comfort and therapeutic zones have decreased significantly, while activities in your overdoing it zone have increased.

In order to gradually increase your energy envelope, it is recommended that you carefully begin to practice activities in your **therapeutic zone** (green colour).

Physical activity within your therapeutic zone

How do you know if a physical activity is in your therapeutic zone? Here are two helpful tools you can use.

1. **Heart rate monitoring** is a useful tool to help you engage in an activity without overdoing it. The idea is that you can keep your heart rate low enough to avoid overexertion. To learn more about this, please see the section on [Heart Rate Monitoring](#) in *MyGuide*.
2. **Rate of perceived exertion (RPE)**.

With long COVID, it is not recommended to push yourself. Instead,

activities in your therapeutic zone should feel like no more than a moderate effort (RPE 3). In other words, a little more than what would be completely easy and comfortable, but it should not feel at all hard to do (RPE 4 or more).

Rating	Descriptor
0	Rest
1	Very, Very Easy
2	Easy
3	Moderate
4	Somewhat Hard
5	Hard
6	.
7	Very Hard
8	.
9	.
10	Maximal

Symptom titrated activity

This is an approach to progressing activity that is recommended for people experiencing post-exertional malaise. It involves very slowly increasing activity while closely monitoring symptoms.

You only increase activity if your symptoms have remained stable. You do not attempt to keep doing an activity if your fatigue or overall symptoms have already increased.

As previously mentioned, you must be in your energy envelope before you attempt to begin symptom titrated activity. This means your symptoms have been at a manageable level while you have been able to complete all of your necessary activities, such as preparing meals, doing self-care, etc. for at least 2 weeks.

Principles of safely progressing with activity





1. Increase how often you do an activity (frequency) before increasing how long you do an activity (duration) before doing more intense or difficult activities. For example, walk more often on flat level ground, before you walk for longer and before you walk uphill.
2. For duration, increase by no more than 10% at a time. For example, if you are able to go for a slow 5-minute walk regularly without any

increase in your symptoms, you can try increasing to a slow 5.5-minute walk since 30 seconds would be 10% of 5 minutes.

3. After you try a small increase, monitor your symptoms for at least 72 hours (3 days).
4. If your symptoms remain stable, you can try repeating the exact same activity.
5. If your symptoms are still stable, stay at that activity level for 7 to 10 days before attempting to increase again.
6. If you experience an increase in your symptoms, rest as needed to allow for recovery, then go back to the previously well tolerated level and stay there until your symptoms are stable again for 7 to 10 days.

You can use the [Symptoms and Activities Tracker Booklet](#) available in *MyGuide* to help track and monitor your symptoms day to day.

Other strategies to help you return to physical activity

Start in a lying down or reclined position - this will use less energy and you can more fully rest between intervals of activity.

- For cardio, this may be recumbent cycling. For strengthening, this could be exercises such as leg lifts or abdominal exercises.
- You may want to avoid upper body strengthening at first, especially movements with your arms overhead or your weight supported on your arms.

- These types of exercise can demand much more energy, increase your heart rate too much or trigger feelings of breathlessness. These considerations are particularly important if you have the symptoms of postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS).
- You can learn more about [POTS](#) and [Dysautonomia](#) in *MyGuide*.

Try incorporating rest breaks into your activity and use breath work to keep your heart rate lower and allow your body to recover.

- For example, try walking for 1 minute, then resting for 1 minute while practicing breath control, and repeat.
- These rests can be used for other activities like lifting weights as well, and starting with less repetitions in each set is recommended (for example, a set of 5, then rest before trying another set).
- Use your breath with strengthening exercises – exhale to lift, inhale to lower. This will help you calm your nervous system, keeping your heart rate and breathing rate lower.
- You can learn more about [Breath Work](#) and [Heart Rate Monitoring](#) in *MyGuide*.

Where to next?

- Learn more about [Post-Exertional Malaise](#) (PEM), [Pacing](#) (energy envelope), [Heart Rate Monitoring](#), [POTS](#) and [Dysautonomia](#), and [Breath Work](#)
- Use [Symptoms and Activities Tracker booklet](#) to help track and monitor your symptoms day to day.

