

# Post-exertional malaise and COVID-19

## What you need to know

### What is it?

Some people who are recovering from COVID-19 experience times where they feel exhausted and have difficulty thinking, and have other symptoms after a minimal amount of activity.

This can be brought on by a physical, mental, or emotional effort, however minor. This is known as post-exertional malaise (PEM), an abnormal, disproportionate response to effort. This extreme exhaustion can occur 24-72 hours after the activity that triggered it and can last for days or weeks.



People with PEM become caught up in a cycle of “push and crash” (periods of overactivity followed by forced rest). When their symptoms are mild, they push to get as much done as they can, which triggers extreme exhaustion. This makes their symptoms worse, which in turn leads to forced rest or a crash. The push-crash cycle leads to discouragement and frustration in these people, who feel like they have no control over their situation.

If this sounds familiar, rest assured that there are pacing strategies that can help. Basically, you need to break the cycle by resting and not pushing your

limits. To help with your recovery, you need to do light activities for a while. You can also divide your energy-intensive activities (things that take a lot of energy) into smaller tasks, with rest periods in between. **It’s very important that you not wait until you feel tired before resting.** By applying these strategies, you can decrease the frequency and severity of episodes of PEM.

Increased physical activity (including exercise) is not recommended for people with PEM. Instead, focus on managing the symptoms and maintaining your quality of life using pacing and body awareness strategies.

By staying within your energy envelope—meaning knowing what you can and can’t do—you can gain some control over your symptoms. This offers the possibility of a more stable and predictable life. And by living your life according to a plan, based on pacing strategies, you can limit your episodes of PEM and be more aware of what triggers your symptoms. This is the key to stabilizing your condition and improving your quality of life.

### The benefits of a plan based on pacing strategies

- Less frequent and intense symptoms
- Less mental and physical suffering
- More stable and predictable life
- Sense of control
- Less forced rest time
- More time for doing what you enjoy
- Better chance for improvement

## Putting your plan in place

### 1. Finding your energy envelope (what you can and can't do)

To find your energy envelope, you can track what you do each day and your energy levels. This will help you see when you're overdoing it and where there's a risk of triggering PEM. It will also help you see patterns in the "push and crash" cycle.

### 2. Adapting to your energy envelope

You need to adapt your life so you live within your envelope. This is a gradual process, usually involving the use of multiple strategies. You'll need to keep an open mind about new ways of doing things.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Rank your priorities in order of importance;
- Plan your activities around a realistic schedule and based on your priorities;
- Spread out or pare down your activities;
- Share the workload with family and friends;
- Rest before AND after any activity;
- Alternate mental activities with more physical activities;
- Get used to taking total rest periods during the day (no screens, phone, conversations);
- Adapt your environment and postures to make your tasks easier to perform;
- Monitor your heart rate during effort, for example, with a smart watch.

These self-management strategies will help improve your quality of life and give you more control over your symptoms. By applying these strategies and consistently pacing yourself, over time you may be able to do more without aggravating your symptoms.

Most symptoms of long COVID improve over time. Be patient and kind to yourself. Most importantly, if you're worried about your symptoms or need more support and advice, don't hesitate to speak to a health professional, whether it be your family doctor, an occupational therapist, or a physiotherapist.

### References:

Décary, S. (2021, 26 février). COVID longue, EM-SFC et Hippocrate : une histoire de partenariat patient. [présentation d'un conférencier invité]. Réseau-1 Québec. [reseau1quebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pre%CC%81sentationCovidLongR1Q.pdf](https://reseau1quebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pre%CC%81sentationCovidLongR1Q.pdf)

Post COVID-19 Interdisciplinary Clinical Care Network. (2021, 22 mars). Post-Exertional Malaise in Post COVID-19 Recovery. [www.phsa.ca/health-info-site/Documents/post\\_covid-19\\_Post-Exertional\\_Malaise.pdf](https://www.phsa.ca/health-info-site/Documents/post_covid-19_Post-Exertional_Malaise.pdf)

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Remember that practicing diligent pacing strategies and staying within your energy envelope are effective ways of managing PEM.

If you have questions about long COVID, please email us at: [readaptation.covid.ci:sssmo16@ssss.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:readaptation.covid.ci:sssmo16@ssss.gouv.qc.ca).

#### Our mission

To maintain, improve, and restore the health and well-being of the Québec population by making accessible an array of integrated and quality health and social services, while contributing to the social and economic development of Québec.

#### Our vision

Accessible and efficient health care and services that adapt to the needs of Québécois.

#### Our goals

The CISSS de la Montérégie-Ouest achieves its goals through its innovative approaches and stands apart through:

- its exemplary offer of care and integrated services based on interdisciplinarity, accessibility, and adaptability to the needs of its population;
- its willingness to question and improve its professional, clinical, and administrative practices;
- its appreciation of its personnel and the implementation of human resource management practices;
- its strong relationships with its partners.

#### Our values

Our actions are guided by five equal and interconnected values: compassion, collaboration, commitment, confidence and consistency.