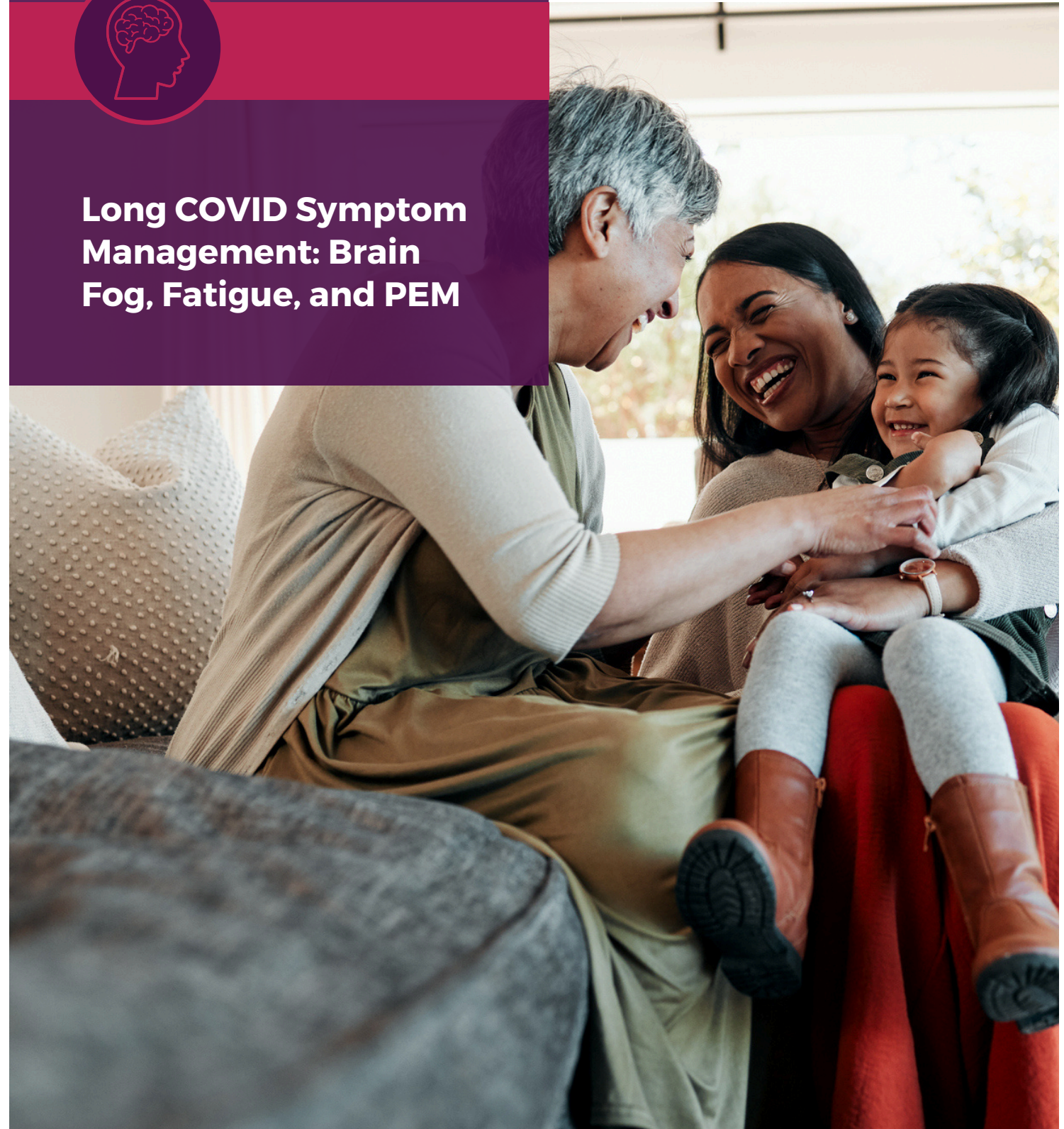




Long COVID Symptom Management: Brain Fog, Fatigue, and PEM



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Brain Fog

Brain fog refers to multiple symptoms that affect our cognitive (thinking) and mental processes. One study suggests that nearly half of Long COVID patients report symptoms that can include feeling slow, having trouble thinking or concentrating, being confused, and/or being forgetful. Even people with only mild symptoms can develop long-term problems with attention, concentration, and memory. Long COVID brain fog can affect people differently. Some people have a hard time remembering things, while others cannot read a book.

Tips to Help with Brain Fog

- Tell your doctor about the long-term symptoms you are still experiencing.
- Your provider may refer you to a speech language pathologist (SLP), also called a speech therapist, to see if cognitive therapy would help you. The SLP will perform an evaluation of your brain fog by asking you questions. If you need cognitive therapy, the SLP will help you with different strategies and “brain training” exercises.
- Learn how to manage your energy so you do not become overly tired. Brain fog can get worse if you push yourself too much physically and/or mentally. You may be able to learn how to pace yourself and conserve your energy by going to occupational therapy and using “structured pacing.”
- Make written to-do lists that include appointment dates and times to help you remember.
- Exercising, eating a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, participating in social activities, and avoiding drugs and alcohol can help your thinking and memory.
- Pay attention to your overall wellness. Brain fog symptoms can be made worse because of other conditions you may have, such as:
 - Stress
 - Sleeping problems, like insomnia
 - Anxiety and/or depression
 - Migraines and/or frequent headaches

Fatigue and Post-Exertional Malaise (PEM)

Long COVID can cause low energy. People may notice they struggle with doing things that used to be easy, or not being able to do what they used to do. This can be frustrating and can have an emotional effect on you.

Sometimes fatigue and other symptoms can get worse after using mental or physical energy. This is often referred to as post-exertional malaise (PEM). If you have PEM, everyday tasks like showering, walking, or even reading or watching television can be too much for you and worsen your Long COVID symptoms. Any activity you do that uses mental, emotional, or physical energy can cause your symptoms to flare-up or get worse. With PEM, “pushing through” can harm you more than help you.

Tips to Help with PEM

Long COVID symptoms often get better with time, and there are ways to help you avoid flare-ups. One way to help with PEM is to practice pacing. Pacing is a strategy that is used to help you manage and limit your energy. Pacing helps keep you from doing too much and gives your brain and body time to recover from activities.

To practice pacing, you need to understand and work within your limits. This can take time to figure out. Write down your symptoms and activity levels so you can start to see patterns in your symptoms. Your health care provider may want you to work with an occupational therapist to work on and build these skills.

Pacing helps you slow down, decide what is important, and organize your life so you can do what matters the most to you while listening to your body and getting enough rest.

The 4 P’s of Pacing

When practicing pacing, remember the 4 P’s: Prioritize, Plan, Pacing, and Pleasure.

1. Prioritize

- Choose how you spend your energy. Do the things that are most important to you first. Try to let go of things that do not matter as much right now.
- Write down the tasks you want to get done and keep track of when you do them.

2. Plan

- Plan your day. Do the things that are most important to you when you feel your best.
- Take short naps or rest breaks between activities.
- Try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.

3. Pacing

- Think about ways to make tasks easier, such as sitting down while you shower or shave.
- Think about how you can break up certain tasks, such as folding laundry one day and putting it away the next day.
- Ask for help when you need it.

4. Pleasure

- Be sure to do the things you enjoy, even if you have to do less of them.
- Think about how you can make those enjoyable tasks a priority. You could:
 - Ask a friend to bring over dinner if it is too hard to go out.
 - Grow plants inside if it is too hard for you to garden outside.
 - Join an online book club or support group if you cannot attend in-person events.

Remember: Activities that may have been relaxing before you had COVID-19 may not be anymore. For example, watching TV, reading, or talking on the phone may not be relaxing if you are using brain power and/or emotional energy. Reducing light and noise, deep breathing, and napping can help.