

Post-Exertional Malaise:

What Is It and How Do I Manage It for My Child?

What Is Post-Exertional Malaise?

Post-exertional malaise (PEM) is when a person feels much worse after doing things that use even small amounts of energy. This can happen after physical activity, thinking hard, or feeling strong emotions. Someone with PEM may have new or worse symptoms after exercising, studying for a test, or having an argument. These symptoms feel like a physical or mental shutdown from being very tired or having to use your brain to do everyday things. PEM symptoms usually begin about 24 hours after activity or start a few hours or days later. It is different than just feeling tired or sore after doing something hard. PEM is an important symptom to look out for when studying Long COVID.

How to Handle PEM

Find out what makes your child feel worse. Some things that make you feel worse can be stopped or avoided, but not all of them. Writing down what your child does and how they feel each day can help. Here are some things that might make PEM happen:

- Moving their body or staying still: running, walking, taking a bath, brushing hair or teeth, or standing or sitting upright
- Thinking a lot: talking to people, doing homework, or learning at school
- Things they see, hear, or feel: bright or flashing lights, sudden noises, or noises that repeat
- Feelings: hard times that cause them to be upset or scared, talking with friends and family
- Things around them: changes in weather, air that's not clean, or things they might be allergic to

Think of energy like a battery. Some people find it helpful to think of energy like a rechargeable battery. It is important to keep the battery charged by using small amounts of energy and stopping before your battery runs out. Resting in between activities recharges the battery.

Find your child's starting energy level. To find this, start by cutting your child's activities in half. This starting energy level can change over time and may get better or worse. If your child is doing too much activity, they may get more tired over time. But if your child can stop what they are doing before getting tired, they might be able to do more later.

Think about the activities your child did. If something made your child feel worse before, think about:

- How long they did the activity
- How hard the activity was
- What part of the body they used

Shorten activity times. If your child needs to do the activity again, try to shorten the amount of time they spend doing it. Also, try to make it easier so your child doesn't have to use as much energy as the first time.

Give yourself extra time to do things, rest, and feel better. There is no way to fix PEM completely, but if possible, try to only do things when you feel okay and rest when you're tired. Plan for extra rest and listen to their body when it says to stop. You may even try something called "radical rest." Radical rest is when you avoid doing anything *before* a planned activity. Some people with PEM have found that radical rest can make symptoms better or even stop them from happening. Some things your child can do to make them feel better are activities that don't need a lot of energy, like reading to them or drawing. Make sure that they eat and drink plenty of water too.

Break up big projects into smaller parts and focus on what's most important.

- When a project is split into smaller parts, it allows time to rest in between parts and continue working on it later. For example, instead of having your child clean a whole room at once, have them clean 1 part at a time.
- Choose activities that really matter to your child. If something is important, see if someone else can help your child do it. Or, see if you can change the day something has to be done to plan more time for rest and recovery.