

Educating Physiotherapists On The Implications Of Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome And Myalgic Encephalomyelitis During The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Virtual Approach

Michelle Bull, Nicola Clague-Baker, Natalie Hilliard, Karen Leslie

When the worldwide impact of COVID 19 started to become apparent, a common theme was how as health professionals we had to collectively extrapolate our knowledge and experience from other conditions to help us manage a new condition. In April 2020 as Physios for ME we began to think about the implications of the pandemic for rehabilitation and how our knowledge and experience might help inform this.

Evidence from previous epidemics suggested that up to 10% of people with COVID19 could go on to develop post viral fatigue syndrome which if persistent after 4 – 5 months may be diagnosed as Myalgic encephalomyelitis ME (sometimes also known as MECFS – chronic fatigue syndrome)

Swift identification of PVFS is important because the management techniques are significantly different to the traditional reconditioning approach that we as physiotherapists are so familiar with. Recent research has shown that people with ME have an abnormal physiological response to exercise and require maintenance of activity below anaerobic threshold to avoid symptom exacerbation, including post exertional malaise (PEM the hallmark feature of ME). It is therefore crucial that physiotherapists involved in the rehabilitation of people post COVID-19 are aware of when standard rehabilitation may be detrimental and the implications for management of this cohort.

However, recent exploratory surveys we have carried out showed undergraduate physiotherapy courses in the UK do not routinely include ME as a subject. Additionally 53% of people with ME reported physiotherapy had made their symptoms worse; highlighting the need for an education programme to increase knowledge and awareness of PVFS and ME to ensure safe effective rehabilitation for people with post COVID-19. With the range of symptoms being described post COVID-19, an education programme needed to have potential for significant reach across all fields of physiotherapy.

The virus itself presented unique challenges to delivering an education programme in traditional ways, necessitating delivery through virtual mechanisms. An online education programme was developed to educate physiotherapists in PVFS and ME, to raise awareness and highlight the implications for post-COVID rehabilitation.

Core elements included a slide-deck, series of eight podcasts/webinars, regular social media messaging and a specific covid-19 webpage on our website www.physiosforme.com We also wrote an article published in the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy Frontline magazine, reaching over 50,000 members in the UK.

Feedback from the educational programme showed that it did raise awareness of post viral fatigue syndrome and ME with many participants reporting that this was new information for them. We also know that participants in educational activities shared and spread their learning with other physiotherapists and we saw spikes in activity to our website as podcasts and other educational activity were published. This demonstrates it is possible to raise awareness and educate using a range of online methods and there is a ripple effect to this learning with participants spreading information more widely across different virtual platforms.

Through increased knowledge and awareness of PVFS, ME and the implications for rehabilitation, the results of our education programme will translate into improved practice with safe effective rehabilitation delivered to people post COVID-19.

With the establishment of rehab programmes to support people with Long Covid it is essential that physios are able to identify post viral fatigue syndrome and adapt their programmes of treatment accordingly to avoid harm.

The positive feedback and significant uptake of the educational activities demonstrate a clear need to educate physiotherapists in PVFS and ME, which should be considered by providers of physiotherapy education. This training should reflect the biomedical approach to management of people with PVFS and ME underpinned by the latest research regarding abnormal physiological response to exercise in this cohort. For more information, please visit our website www.physiosforme.com where you can access the COVID19 educational materials, see the results of the surveys I have mentioned, find out more about the latest evidence regarding exercise in this cohort and also discover what physiotherapy can offer for people with ME.