

Guillain Barré Syndrome and Exercise

Pacing yourself to maximize your recovery

This handout explains activity recommendations when recovering from Guillain Barré Syndrome to maximize your physical recovery.

What is Guillain Barré Syndrome?

Guillain Barré Syndrome (GBS) is a condition where the body attacks the nerves that send information about how we move and feel. This can cause weakness, numbness, poor balance, and an overwhelming lack of energy. It can also cause vision changes, dizziness, and trouble breathing or swallowing, but these are less common.

There are different types of GBS, and your experience may be different depending on what type you have. These problems can get worse for up to 2 to 4 weeks before they start to get better. Medical treatment and physical therapy can help you recover.



Your physical therapist will create an exercise program for you to follow.

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is an overwhelming lack of energy. It can be mental or physical tiredness. It can make even basic daily activities hard to do. You may also feel like you cannot think clearly.

What happens when you are fatigued?

When you get fatigued, it may be because you have done more than your body can handle. You may suddenly feel exhausted, and you may not have the energy to do even a small tasks that normally feel easy to do.

How can you monitor your level of fatigue?

1. **Rate of perceived exertion (RPE) scale:** On a scale of 1–10, how hard does it feel like you are working to finish the activity? A good goal for your rate of perceived exertion with a GBS diagnosis is **2–4 out of 10** (see more details on page 2). With GBS, it is important to avoid overworking because it may cause more damage to your nerves and may slow your recovery.
2. **Muscle tenderness test:** Firmly press on the middle of the muscle with a flat hand. If it is painful or tender, this may be a sign that the muscle has been working too hard.
3. **Form fatigue:** This happens when fatigue changes the way you move. For example, standing up from the same chair may start to take more effort or more support. Another example is a leg lift exercise. At first you may be able to lift your leg high off the bed, but as fatigue increases, your leg lifts may get lower and lower. This can change from day to day.



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Listen to Your Body

Rating your perceived exertion (RPE) on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is the lowest effort and 10 is the highest effort. When you are active, think about how hard you are working, or how much effort it takes to keep doing the activity.

The table below shows the Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) scale. You are exercising at a low to moderate level if you are working **between levels 2 and 4 on the scale of 0 to 10**. The area outlined in bold halfway down the table is your Goal Training Zone.

Effort Level (RPE)

RPE	Work Load	Talk Test
0	Very, very light	At rest
1	Very light	Gentle walking or strolling
2	Fairly light	Steady pace, not breathless
3		
4	Somewhat hard	Brisk walking, can hold a conversation
5	Hard	Very brisk walking, must take a breath every 4 to 5 words
6		
7	Very hard	Cannot talk and keep pace
8		
9	Very, very hard	
10		

Goal Training Zone

Table adapted from Avers, D., & Brown, M. (2009). White Paper Strength Training for the Older Adult. Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy, 32(4), 148-152.

Getting Stronger

Getting stronger when you have GBS **will be different from a normal exercise program**. Because GBS damages your nerves, it is important to avoid very hard exercise that causes fatigue or overwork. Lifting heavy weights or exercising for a long time will not necessarily help you recover faster.

Tips for exercise:

- Follow the program made by your physical therapist (PT)
- You may start with exercises using just your body weight or very light weights
- Aim for short periods of low to moderate intensity exercise
- Your goal after a workout is not to feel pain or fatigue
- Increase activity **only** if your symptoms are improving

Stop exercise and tell your physical therapist (PT) if:

- You have more **weakness** 1 to 5 days after exercise
- You have **numbness** or **tingling** after exercise
- You feel **muscle soreness** after exercise

How to Support Your Recovery

- The “no pain no gain” idea is **not** true when you have GBS. Pacing yourself lets your nerves heal as quickly as possible.
- Increase repetitions before resistance to avoid injury to muscles, tendons, and joints.
 - This means you should first increase how many times you do an exercise before adding more weight or resistance. For example, if you are doing a leg lift exercise with no weight and can do 5 repetitions comfortably, try increasing to 8–10 repetitions over time before adding ankle weights or resistance bands.
- If you have increased fatigue that lasts longer than 12-24 hours, this is likely a sign that you have overworked. It takes trial and error to find the right number of repetitions for your body. Use this information to try doing a little less next time and slowly build your way back up.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Your physical therapist will answer your questions about exercise during your therapy sessions in the hospital.

Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns about your medical care.