Living Well with Polio

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Practical guidance for everyday life with the late effects of polio

Living with the late effects of polio (LEoP) means working with a body that may change slowly over time. You may notice more fatigue, weakness, pain, or balance issues than you did years ago – even in areas that weren't severely affected by the original polio infection. The good news is that there are strategies that can help. With the right support, you can find new ways to stay active, protect your energy, and keep doing the things that matter most to you.

Energy and Fatigue Management
Fatigue in LEoP can be physical, mental, and emotional. It's one of the most common and frustrating symptoms – and it doesn't always improve with rest alone. Many people describe feeling "drained" even after simple tasks. We encourage you to pace your activities across the day or week, plan rest breaks into your routine (not just after you feel exhausted), break big tasks into smaller steps, avoid the "boom and bust" cycle of overdoing and crashing, and track your energy patterns to understand what times of day work best for you.

Movement and Strength
Polio-affected muscles often fatigue more easily and recover more slowly. Over time, even previously unaffected areas can weaken due to compensation. Exercise is still important – but it must be done carefully. We suggest avoiding "no pain, no gain" thinking, trying low-resistance, short-duration movement like walking in water, supported cycling, or stretching, working with a physiotherapist who understands polio and can build a safe, tailored programme, and prioritising function and sustainability, not intensity.

Posture, Pain, and Joint Protection
Many people with LEoP experience joint or muscle pain due to poor biomechanics, long-term compensation, or joint wear. Sometimes pain develops in areas that were never affected by the original polio. You may benefit from reviewing your movement patterns and posture with a therapist, using orthotics, splints, or braces to reduce strain, sitting for more tasks to reduce fatigue and joint loading, and seeking early input if pain is affecting your daily life.

Falls Prevention and Balance
Fatigue, weakness, joint changes, and poor sensation can all increase the risk of falling. Falls can knock confidence and cause injuries – but they are often preventable. We recommend identifying hazards in the home and using stable footwear, using walking aids that are correctly fitted, allowing extra time for tasks – rushing increases the risk. Talking openly with your clinician about any falls or near-misses can help reduce the risk of further falls.

Rest and Recovery
Rest is an essential part of managing LEoP – not an afterthought. Many people with polio have spent their lives "pushing through," but with time, that can come at a cost. Try to treat rest as part of your routine, not something you have to earn, use short, frequent breaks rather than

long recovery periods, make rest restorative – quiet time, music, deep breathing, or just lying down, and let go of guilt around resting – it's a strength, not a weakness.

Communication and Social Life

Polio can affect how you interact with others – especially if you feel misunderstood, judged for needing help, or reluctant to use aids in public. Some people feel they've lost confidence or don't know how to explain their needs. Helpful strategies include practising simple statements like "I need a rest now" or "I'm not able to today," letting friends and whānau know what support looks like for you, connecting with others who've had similar experiences – you're not alone.

Emotional Wellbeing

It's normal to feel frustrated, sad, or anxious about changes in your body. Many people feel grief for what they could once do. These feelings are real and valid – and deserve attention just like physical symptoms. Consider talking to a counsellor or psychologist familiar with disability or chronic conditions, using relaxation or mindfulness tools to help manage stress, finding a peer group or support network, and making space for joy – even small, low-energy pleasures.

Using Aids and Equipment

Braces, wheelchairs, scooters, and daily living aids can make a big difference in your comfort and independence. These are not always easy to accept, especially if you've spent decades avoiding them. It may help to think of aids as tools that let you do more, not as symbols of decline. Seek a professional assessment to make sure your aids are the right fit, review your equipment regularly – what worked five years ago might not work now, and seek advice before you buy – especially online.

Staying Informed

LEoP is a condition that isn't always well understood – even in health settings. But there are resources and clinicians who do know how to help. Make sure you ask to see a neuro-informed physiotherapist or occupational therapist, advocate for yourself if you feel unheard, bring notes or a summary of your symptoms to appointments, and contact cann for trusted information and support.

You Deserve Support That Fits Your Life

You've lived with polio for a long time. Your needs, goals, and body may have changed – and that's okay. At cann, we believe support should be flexible, respectful, and grounded in lived experience. We'll work with you to create a plan that helps you conserve energy, protect your body, and live the way that feels right for you.