

# Declan Rice Playing While Recovering From a Virus Underscores the UK's Failure to Warn About Post-Viral Illness and M.E.

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England midfielder Declan Rice, still recovering from a virus, played 45 minutes in 33+ degree heat during the Quarter Final match against Norway on Saturday night. Fans noted he was clearly struggling and wished him well on social media. His commitment was widely praised, but for people living with post-viral illness and Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E.), the moment was deeply concerning.

When a national figure pushes through illness in extreme conditions, it reinforces a powerful cultural message: that exertion during or after viral infection is harmless, even admirable. For many people, it is not. For some, it leads to lifelong disability.

This moment exposes a critical failure in UK public health communication, specifically the Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidance, published on Friday, which encourages staying active but does not include clear caveats about post-viral instability, risk, or Post-Exertional Malaise (PEM). Without these caveats, the public is left with dangerously incomplete advice.

One of the most damaging myths surrounding M.E. is that it affects only certain types of people. In reality, M.E. can strike anyone:

- children and adults
- men and women
- people of every racial and ethnic background
- elite athletes and people with sedentary lifestyles alike

Sally Callow, Founder of social enterprise ME Foggy Dog, states - "Viruses don't care who you are, what you do for a living, or how fit you might be. You're not being tough by fighting back against an infection, you're putting yourself at risk. The best chance anyone has of a full recovery, or of avoiding worsened long-term complications, is to rest far more than they think they need. That message must be made clear to the public."

Physical fitness does not protect against post-viral illness. Many hundreds of thousands of people in the UK developed M.E. after "pushing through" viral infections, unaware of the risks. We sincerely hope Declan Rice makes a full recovery despite overexerting while still symptomatic. Many others did not.

Across the M.E. community, people describe remarkably similar experiences. Before diagnosis, they did not know what PEM was, did not realise everyday activities counted as exertion, and did not understand that rest was protective. Many assumed exertion meant only sport or exercise, not showering, commuting, studying, or housework. They followed general public health advice, usually offered by healthcare professionals, to stay active, unaware that it could worsen their condition.

These stories are not isolated. They are representative of the wider M.E. community, which has been consistently harmed by missing public health caveats.

People who meet diagnostic criteria for M.E. but remain undiagnosed are extremely difficult to reach. They are not in specialist clinics or patient groups. They are not reading M.E.-specific resources. They are simply trying to recover from a virus, following general public health advice, advice that currently lacks the clear, publicly communicated, caveats they urgently need.

This is precisely why an official public messaging campaign is essential. Without it, misinformation spreads easily. Harmful "push through it" narratives dominate. People unknowingly worsen their condition. Early intervention opportunities are lost and preventable disability becomes common.

The absence of clear, authoritative messaging creates a vacuum, and that vacuum is filled with confusion, contradictory advice, and cultural pressure to stay active at all costs.

The UK Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidance promotes movement and activity, but without any publicly communicated caveats about post-viral illness, PEM, or the risks of exertion during recovery. This omission leaves the public vulnerable.

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Victorian-era public health campaigns understood something modern messaging has forgotten: rest is medicine. Rest is a legitimate, evidence-based intervention during and after viral illness.

The public needs clear, accessible information about PEM, a delayed worsening of symptoms 24 to 72 hours after physical, cognitive, or emotional exertion. PEM is not normal tiredness; it is a pathological response. Everyday activities count as exertion. Stepping back from life early can mean the difference between recovery and lifelong disability.

This is not specialist or niche medical knowledge; it is fundamental public health information that must be embedded in national guidance. At present, an estimated 1.3 million people in the UK meet the diagnostic criteria for M.E., and every one of them experiences Post-Exertional Malaise. Yet many remain unaware of what PEM is or how it affects them, largely because gaps in clinical understanding mean their GPs have never explained it.

In the absence of clear caveats from the UK's Chief Medical Officers, the public is left with dangerously incomplete guidance. A national public health campaign is urgently needed, one that explains post-viral illness and PEM in simple terms, emphasises the benefits of rest, teaches people to recognise early warning signs, challenges harmful cultural narratives about "pushing through," and ensures that healthcare professionals and the public understand that overexertion can cause long-term harm. Crucially, such a campaign must reach undiagnosed people, who are currently invisible to the system and at greatest risk.

This campaign must be as visible and culturally embedded as Victorian-era rest messaging, because the stakes are just as high.

When a national hero plays through illness in extreme heat, millions see it as strength. But for those at risk of post-viral illness, it models behaviour that can lead to permanent disability.

We cannot continue to celebrate endurance while ignoring the science of post-viral harm.

The UK needs a public health messaging overhaul, one that protects people, prevents avoidable disability, and ensures that no one loses their health simply because they were never told to rest.

## Contact

For further information or interviews, please contact: Sally Callow, ME Foggy Dog (social enterprise)

[sally@mefoggydog.org](mailto:sally@mefoggydog.org)

[www.mefoggydog.org](http://www.mefoggydog.org)

## Company Contact:

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### ME Foggy Dog

T. 07725658199

E. [sally@mefoggydog.org](mailto:sally@mefoggydog.org)

W. <http://www.mefoggydog.org>

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