



**Royal Berkshire**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Road to Recovery: Recovering from post-acute COVID-19 (long COVID)

## Information and Advice

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## What is COVID-19?

Covid-19 is an infectious virus that mainly affects the lungs. It is transmitted through droplets created from sneezing and coughing. The virus enters the body via the nose, mouth and eyes.

## What is post-acute COVID-19 (long COVID)?

It is the term for someone who has not recovered for several weeks or months following the start of symptoms that were suggestive of COVID, whether they were tested for COVID-19 or not.

We do not yet know why some people's recovery takes much longer than others.

## What are the symptoms of post-acute COVID-19 (long COVID)?

The most commonly reported symptoms are:

- Fatigue
- Muscle, body aches
- Difficulty breathing
- As well as the physical symptoms listed, it is very common to experience feelings of anxiety and low mood.

## Controlling shortness of breath

### *Relieving shortness of breath*

People who have had a respiratory illness can often feel short of breath (SOB) afterwards. Often daily tasks such as walking, getting dressed or doing chores around the house can cause this breathlessness. Feeling like you can't catch your breath can make you panic or feel frightened.

Learning to control these feelings of breathlessness is a skill that will help you to be less troubled by this and enable you to do more. When you are feeling breathless, do not panic. Your breathing will settle.

### *Breathing pattern disorder*

This can happen when we breathe more than necessary to meet the body's natural requirements. This can lead to a chemical imbalance in the blood due to a lowering of the carbon dioxide levels.

Over breathing is a normal reaction to any stressful situation, but once it passes, breathing returns to a normal rate of 8-12 breaths per minute. However, sometimes due to the result of prolonged stress or a physical trigger, a continual pattern of over breathing can occur and the breathing pattern does not return to a normal level.

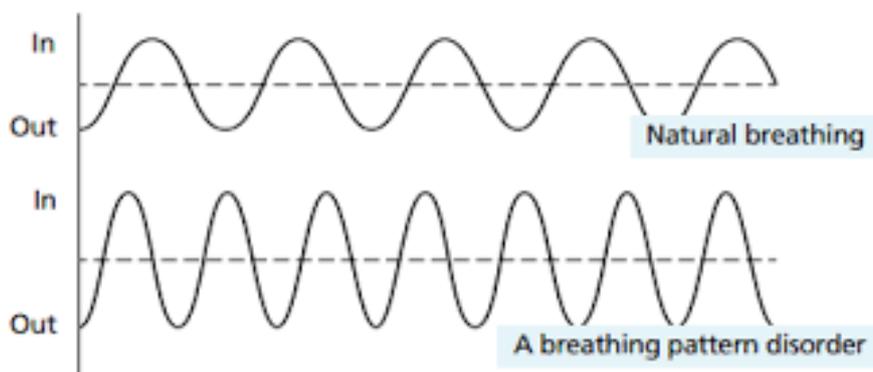
There are many reasons why our breathing can lose its natural rhythm (see diagram).

The most common signs and symptoms of over breathing are:

- Feeling you can't fill your lungs up
- Breathlessness on minimal exertion
- Frequent sighing and yawning
- Palpitations
- Pins and needles in hands/mouth
- Feeling permanently exhausted
- Throat symptoms
- Light headedness
- Anxiety



The graph below shows the difference in breathing depth and rate for somebody breathing naturally compared to a person with a breathing pattern disorder.



## Treatment

- Recognising that you are over-breathing and changing to a more controlled method of breathing.
- Being aware of normal breathing rates both at rest and during activity.
- Nose breathing rather than breathing through your mouth.
- Abdominal breathing pattern re-training.
- Considering lifestyle factors such as diet, sleep hygiene and relaxation.

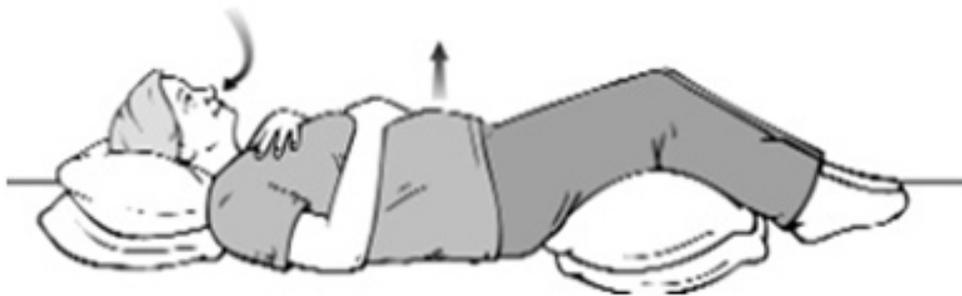
Before you are able to change your breathing to an optimal (more natural) pattern, it's important to recognise how you breathe at the moment.

## What is a normal breathing pattern?

At rest, we normally breathe approximately 8-12 times per minute. The air enters and leaves the nose in a gentle and controlled manner. The main muscle used for breathing is the diaphragm (muscle under the ribcage).

## Identifying your normal breathing pattern

Lie in a comfortable position with a pillow under your head and knees. Place one hand on your chest and one on the top of your tummy.



Watch and feel which of your hands move most as you breathe in and out. This will help you to understand which part of your lungs you use the most.

## Breathing control

Breathing control is using the least effort to breathe gently. It will help when you are feeling short of breath, fearful, anxious or panicked.

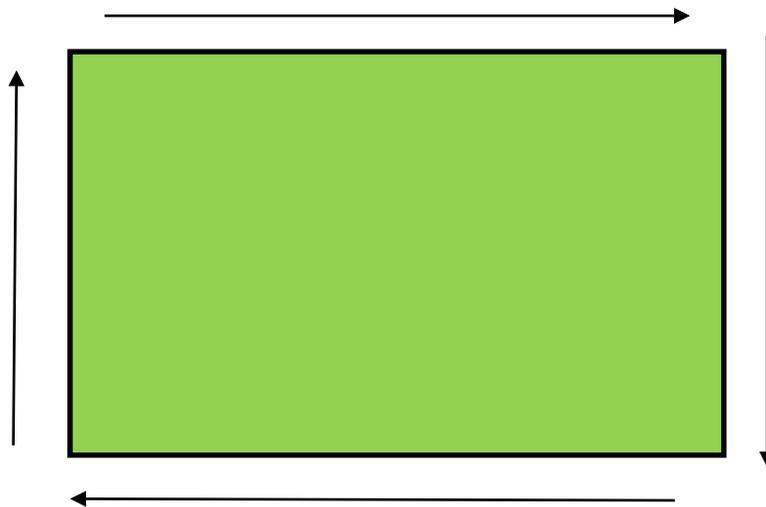
### *How do I do breathing control?*

Make sure you are in a comfortable position. Sitting in an armchair or lying on the bed and ensure that you are as 'soft' as possible.

Breathe in gently through your nose and breathe out through your nose if you can. If this is too difficult, breathe out through your mouth instead.

- Try to let go of any tensions in your body with each breathe out.
- Focus your thoughts on breathing the air towards your stomach, using your diaphragm.
- Gradually try to make each breath slower.
- Closing your eyes may help you to focus and relax.
- Do not force your breathing.

- To ensure your breath out is longer than your breath in you can try counting or visualising.
- Count in for 4 as you breathe in; count out for 7 as you breathe out.
- Visualising a rectangular can help. Trace your finger up the short side as you breathe in, across the long side as you breathe out.



When you have successfully completed this exercise, make sure that your breathing does not suddenly 'increase in size', for example through sighing, yawning or coughing. During breathing control, you may find that you feel 'hungry' for air. This sensation is perfectly normal and may be a result of the levels of carbon dioxide increasing to a more normal level. Try to 'swallow away' the urge to gasp for air. You will find that as you continue to practise this style of breathing that this sensation will diminish.

Practice this style of breathing for about 10 minutes 2-4 times a day.

## **Fatigue after COVID-19**

### **Practical advice for people recovering at home**

#### **Post-viral fatigue**

Post viral fatigue is when you have an extended period of feeling unwell and fatigued (exhausted) after a viral infection. Fatigue is a normal part of the body's response to fighting a viral infection such as COVID-19. Fatigue is likely to continue for some time after the infection has cleared. It can make you sleep more, feel unsteady on your feet, make standing for long periods difficult, as well as affecting your ability to concentrate and your memory.

## ***Initially...***

### **Self-isolate**

Please follow government guidelines. Remember, this includes isolating from your family/household wherever possible, even if they have symptoms or are also self-isolating. If you deteriorate, seek immediate medical help following government guidelines.

### **Rest**

Rest is very important for your body as it fights off infection. You need to rest both your body and mind. Keep television, phones and social media to a minimum. Relaxation, breathing and meditation can all support quality rest – the NHS Apps library has free tools you can try. Sensory relaxation tools such as fragrances, blankets, and relaxing music can also help. If a strategy doesn't work for you, try another one until you find one that does.

### **Sleep**

You may find that you need to sleep more. Make sure you follow healthy sleep habits ensure your room is as dark as possible, have a bedtime routine, and avoid caffeine, eating late and electrical items before bed.

### **Nourishment**

Try to keep your normal routine for eating and drinking. Being ill with a temperature can make you dehydrated so make sure you drink fluid when you're thirsty and enough so that you pass urine with normal frequency and volume.

### **Move**

Get up and move around slowly and gently a few times each day. This will keep your body mobile and help with circulation.

### **Keep activity levels low**

Both physical and cognitive (thinking) activities use energy. Try to do only a small number of these activities each day, including basic activities of daily living, such as washing and dressing.

### **Allow time**

COVID-19 affects people differently, so give yourself time to recover. Its impact afterwards doesn't always reflect the severity of the virus and you don't have to

have been hospitalised to experience fatigue. You may feel pressure to resume your usual activities quickly, but **don't rush**.

### **Do things you enjoy**

Do some low energy activities that you enjoy, such as reading or watching TV, for short periods with regular rests.

### **Stop work**

Please follow government guidelines. Unless you feel fully recovered after self-isolation, you shouldn't work. Your body still needs to focus on fighting the infection.

### ***Next steps...***

#### **Try activities**

If you still feel fatigued after self-isolation but overall, you're improving, keep being gentle with yourself. Slowly try a small amount of light activity that is manageable (probably less than you think) with regular rests. Be mindful that you may feel more tired the next day. Be realistic and kind to yourself.

#### **Rest**

Your body still needs rest to continue healing, so take short breaks throughout the day, even if you don't think you need to. Stop and do nothing, calm your mind, and try breathing and guided relaxation techniques.

#### **Daily routine**

Routine helps your body to stabilise itself. Slowly resume your routine for sleeping, eating and daily activities. If this isn't possible, create a realistic one to follow for now and gradually adjust back to your normal routine. Remember, **don't rush**. If you're having difficulty sleeping, check out the tips and advice from [NHS Every Mind Matters](#).

#### **'Thinking' activities**

Continue to limit everyday 'thinking' activities, such as emails, planning shopping, making decisions, as these all use energy. Try to do them only for set times with regular rest in between.

## Slowly increase activity levels

People often increase activity levels too quickly, which can set them back. Occupational therapists working with people with long term fatigue may only increase activity levels every couple of weeks. So, go slow and steady with activities and avoid pushing through fatigue.

## Work

You may need longer off work than initially anticipated. A phased return works best which is planned with your manager and, if you have one, your occupational health department. You may also need a fit note from your GP. Try to avoid returning to work too soon and without the adjustments that you need to manage fatigue.

## Have fun

Remember the fun things in life. Often people only prioritise things that seem necessary as they return to daily life, but it's important to have a balance. Allow others to help with day to day tasks so you can save energy for the activities you enjoy.

## *Moving forward...*

You may start feeling better gradually. Your recovery from post-viral fatigue could take several months to a year or more. As you start to gradually improve, remember to keep a balance of quality **rest, routine and fun activities**. Stress and worry use energy, so give yourself time and be kind to yourself.

## What if I'm not improving?

Seek advice

- If after building up the pacing of your daily activities, you don't see any improvement in what you can do, then you should seek medical advice by speaking to your GP.
- Find out more about pacing your daily activities in the 'How to conserve energy' guide.
- If you continue to feel extremely fatigued, then specialist fatigue services may be available to provide further guidance. Ask your GP about referral options.

## Useful links:

### *Exercise videos:*

- **British Lung Foundation:** <https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/keep-active/exercise-video>

### *Recovering after COVID resources:*

- **NHS Lancashire Teaching Hospital:** Post COVID resource - information and exercise videos for patients. <https://covidpatientsupport.lthtr.nhs.uk/#/>
- **COVID-19:** Information pack – coping after your hospital stay. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342241825>
- **NHS website:** <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/>

### *Psychological resources:*

- **PsychologyTools:** Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty. <https://bit.ly/3bqpiAT>
- **Talking Therapies:** <https://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/mental-health-and-wellbeing/talking-therapies-berkshire/>
- **Physiotherapy for breathing pattern disorder:** [www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk](http://www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk)
- **NHS Apps Library:** [www.nhs.uk/apps-library](http://www.nhs.uk/apps-library)
- **NHS Every Mind Matters:** [www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/sleep](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/sleep)

*With thanks to Royal College of Occupational Therapists.*

Pulmonary Rehabilitation (Respiratory Medicine)

Royal Berkshire Hospital

Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust

London Road

Reading RG1 5AN

0118 322 5111 (Switchboard)

[www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk)

October 2020. Review due: October 2022