

A breathing guide to help you recover from COVID 19

The long-term effects of COVID 19 are many and varied. Usually, the severity of an illness affects recovery but with COVID 19 this is not always the case and for many, including those who did not need to go to hospital, the recovery period is slow and extended.

Why have I not recovered?

There are many reasons why you may not have recovered as quickly as you anticipated following the acute Covid 19 infection. This leaflet aims to explain some of your symptoms, and some techniques to help you with your recovery.

Breathlessness.

When you develop a chest infection such as COVID 19, changes in the pattern, the rate and the depth of breathing are needed to help your body fight the infection, this response is essential, as your body is under stress and is part of the fight or flight response.

During the acute phase of a severe infection breathing patterns may change to ensure that the body gets all the oxygen it needs. The most common changes are:

- breathing faster than normal
- breathing more deeply than normal
- breathing in and out through your mouth rather than your nose

As the infection improves and your lungs recover, your breathing should return to normal. However, for some, switching off that fight or flight mode can be challenging. The changes in your breathing pattern become habitual, leaving you with a fast and erratic breathing pattern. This may result in you feeling exhausted and breathless and slows down the body's ability to recover. Re-setting your breathing pattern back to normal can take time, concentration and requires you to become more aware of your breathing, but should result in you starting to feel better.

Just as Breathing is essential for life, breathing well is essential for health. When the body is under attack it will adopt appropriate breathing patterns to ensure that enough oxygen is delivered to the tissues, these patterns can then become a habit.

Effects of an altered breathing pattern vary greatly but can include:

- **Breathlessness (at rest, moving around or even when you are talking)**
- **Fatigue & low energy levels**
- **Tired muscles**
- **Tense muscles or twitchy muscles**
- **Unable to exercise**
- **Chest pain and palpitations**
- **Tingling in hands, feet or tip of nose**
- **Headaches**

These symptoms will continue to make you feel unwell and can be very worrying. A few people who have had COVID 19 have developed long-term effects in their lungs and the heart, but even if this is the case, ensuring that you are breathing properly will not make any of these changes any worse and may help to relieve some of your symptoms.

Check your own breathing:

Look at how you are breathing- is it through the nose or the mouth? Do your shoulders, arms and hands feel tense? Can you feel or see your upper chest rising or are you breathing into your belly? Can you hear yourself breathing? Do you sigh or yawn a lot?

Breathing well at rest means breathing quietly in and out through your nose, into your belly, at between 8-16 breaths per minute.

Breathing with your nose ensures that the air is warmed, humidified and cleaned before it reaches your lungs. It also slows down the breath which helps the air go down in to the lower part of the lungs.

Breathing into your belly indicates that you are breathing with your diaphragm, the big dome-shaped muscle underneath your lungs. Diaphragmatic breathing, also known as relaxed breathing, is how we are meant to breathe when at rest. As the diaphragm contracts, or works, it moves down into your abdomen, pulling air into your lungs, and pushing your belly forwards, as it relaxes back into its dome shape, the air passes out of your lungs and your belly sinks back down. Breathing with your diaphragm ensures we use the bottom part of our lungs, which allows the body to move more oxygen in to the blood and uses less energy per breath. It is also known as tummy breathing as this is where we see the movement: see the videos on normal breathing on the web-site.-
www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk

Feeling Fatigued and unable to exercise If you were unwell and unable to get out of bed for a length of time the muscles in your legs and arms become weaker- studies show that we can lose 5% of our strength with just a few days of bed-rest and that for every day in a hospital bed it can take a week to regain it. Rebuilding these muscles can be challenging. Often, we try doing too much too soon and get stuck in a cycle of trying to get back to life pre COVID but then feeling worse after.

It is important that you increase your every-day activity levels very slowly, try some very simple exercises and see how your body responds. If you are much more tired or your muscles ache a lot more the day after you may have pushed yourself too far too soon

Pacing means spreading out activity and alternating it with periods of rest. Learning how to pace is an important part of your recovery. If experiencing severe fatigue you may need to break your day into hour or even half-hour time slots and include a rest into each time period to ensure you spread your energy over the whole day and don't fully use up your energy supplies. During your rest periods try to ensure you are breathing well to help you recover more quickly.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: has been recognised in many who are suffering as a result of the pandemic on both our physical and mental health. It can affect those who have had Covid, their families and the staff who have been looking after them.

Some people are suffering with recurring disturbing memories or dreams following their infection. It is important that you try and talk to someone about these thoughts. Please look at this website for more information: www.mind.org.uk.

Do you feel worried/stressed or anxious?

Emotions have a direct effect on your breathing. The more worried or anxious you feel the more you may feel the need to breathe faster and deeper. This altered pattern contributes to the symptoms you are feeling. Breathing well can be helpful in reducing your symptoms and your feelings of stress and anxiety

How to practise a 'Good Breathing' technique?

- 1 Lie comfortably either on your back or on your side with a pillow under your head and knees Place one hand on your stomach.
- 2 Gently close your mouth, lips together and keep your jaw loose.
- 3 Breathe in gently through your nose, feeling your tummy rise and expand 'like a balloon' as you breathe in. The breath should be unforced and silent.
- 4 Breathe out lightly through your nose if possible, without pushing, keeping your stomach relaxed.
- 5 Make sure you relax and pause at the end of each breath out.
- 6 When you breathe in, your upper chest should be relaxed and not moving. From time to time place your hand on your upper chest to check this.
- 7 As you repeat this sequence be aware of any areas of tension in your body and concentrate on 'letting go', particularly jaw, neck, shoulders and hands.

As your body adapts to this way of breathing, you will find it requires less time and energy and is more relaxing. Remember, the more time put into practising, the sooner you will feel back in control.

By practising good breathing techniques and becoming aware of when your breathing has become erratic you will be helping your body to heal.

It is best to practise Good Breathing as often as you can. Try little and often, e.g., three minutes every hour. Progress to practising whilst sitting, then standing and finally walking.

Remember that your breathing will change as you exercise- and it is normal when moving to breathe through your mouth and to use the muscles around your upper chest and shoulders to help you breathe.

By learning to pace and plan not only your day but your week you will avoid having good days (when you may do too much) and bad days, helping your body to heal.

For further advice on fatigue management including pacing the Physios for ME website has good advice <https://www.physiosforme.com/covid-19>

For further advice about Post-traumatic stress disorder and support with your mental health and well-being the Mind Website has good advice <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/about-ptsd>

Further advice about recovering from Covid Infections can be found on the NHS website www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk

Further advice on Good Breathing can be found at www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk