

# Recovery after coronavirus (COVID-19)

Managing physical symptoms of  
breathlessness, fatigue, anxiety,  
swallow changes, eating and drinking

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## Introduction

During and after your stay in hospital you may experience some of the following physical symptoms – fatigue (tiredness), shortness of breath, body aches, loss of taste and smell, sore throat, cough, changes to your voice, headache and fever.

If you have had a stay on critical care (intensive care unit or high dependency unit) you may also notice problems with your memory, difficulty swallowing and sleeping, and nightmares. These are all very common problems.

This leaflet gives some helpful techniques to manage some of your symptoms during and after your stay in hospital.

Symptoms of coronavirus are different for each person, so some of the techniques shown here may not help you. Please use the ones which apply to you.

If you have any questions, please ask your allocated nurse to contact one of the therapists on your ward before your discharge from hospital.

## Breathlessness

The information given below is designed to help you manage your breathlessness.

If you feel your breathing is getting worse, or you experience new breathlessness, it is important to get medical advice.

### General advice

- Avoid breath-holding during activities, for example, climbing stairs or bending. Try to 'blow as you go'. This means breathing out on effort, such as when bending, lifting, reaching or standing up from a chair or when walking.
- Try to avoid rushing.
- Try matching the rhythm of your breathing to your steps, for example, take a breath in and out on each step when climbing the stairs.
- Sometimes a fan directed towards your mouth and nose can help reduce feelings of breathlessness

### Pursed-lips breathing

Some people find breathing in through the nose and out through narrowed lips helps to ease their breathlessness. This technique tends to help people who have breathlessness with conditions such as COPD or emphysema.

People who find this helpful often use it without realising they are doing it.

Pursed-lips breathing helps to keep the airways open, allowing the air to leave the lungs more easily. This creates more room for the next breath in.

You can use pursed-lips breathing at the same time as relaxed tummy breathing or recovery breathing.

### **Positions to ease breathlessness**

These positions may help to ease your breathlessness at rest and after activity. Experiment with and adapt different positions until you find what works best for you.

The positions in this leaflet place the arms so that the breathing accessory muscles are in a better position to help with breathing.

Leaning forward may also improve the movement of your diaphragm, the main muscle of breathing.



Make sure you are fully over on your side. Resting your upper arm on a pillow may also help.



Relax down onto the pillows as much as possible. Having your legs apart may also help.

## **Positions to ease breathlessness immediately after activity**

The following positions may help to ease breathlessness after you have been active.

With all positions, try to relax the hands, wrists, shoulders, neck and jaw as much as possible.

Experiment with your arm position. Does your breathing feel easier with your hands behind your head or back?



## Fatigue management

Tiredness is a common symptom in coronavirus. It makes you feel less motivated to keep active, which means that often you avoid activities. This can lead to you having even less energy, which can make you more tired. If this behaviour becomes a habit, the cycle can often be difficult to break.

We cannot take away your tiredness completely, but there are a number of ways you can manage it. These might help you to do some of the things that you would like to do.

Think about how much energy you have to use each day. Some people imagine having a 'jug of energy' or liken their energy levels to a battery. Consider what you would like to use your energy for, but always leave something in the jug so that it is never completely empty. Even when you make plans, something unexpected might happen that uses more energy, so it is always good to keep some energy in reserve.

If you imagine your energy in terms of having a 'jug of energy', some activities will top up the energy and other activities will use up the energy in your jug. What would you like to do to use your energy on? Try to keep your 'jug' at least a quarter full at all times.

Here are some ideas to help you manage your fatigue.

## **Pacing**

- Slow down your activities, as they will take less energy.
- Slow down when you talk, eat or cough. These actions can affect your breathing pattern.
- Break down your activities into smaller tasks that are more manageable.
- Allow yourself some time each day to try to relax.

Remember it is better to take a little extra time to complete a task and be able to continue, than to finish the task quickly and feel too tired to continue.

## **Positioning**

- Try to avoid too much bending and twisting, which can be tiring.
- Don't sit or stand for too long without changing your position.
- Think about trying to organise your home so that things are where you need them (for example in the kitchen, have frequently used items nearby).
- It takes less effort to push, pull or slide objects, so try to avoid carrying heavy things.

## **Expectations**

If you are placing high expectations on yourself, it is worth having a think about allowing yourself to do things in a different way that helps with your energy levels.

- Try to be patient with yourself and give yourself time to do things.
- Try to recognise the things that you are achieving.
- Try not to feel disappointed if your recovery seems to be slow. We expect a range of time frames for the symptoms you are experiencing to improve.

It might be helpful to write down in a diary your symptoms and your achievements as you recover. It can help remind you that you are moving forwards even if it progress feels slow.

### **Activity**

It is important to stay as active as you can. A little regular, gentle exercise each day can make a big difference. This can be a walk, run or gentle resistance training. It is also important to graduate your return to exercise, slowly and steadily increasing how much exercise you do. Speak to a therapist if you need any assistance with this.

### **Sleeping**

Even if you are not sleeping at night, try not to sleep during the day. If you do need to sleep during the day, try to keep this down to a short nap rather than a prolonged sleep.

Remember these symptoms will likely improve as you recover from coronavirus.

## **Discharge home from hospital**

Think about any difficulties you may have returning to activities such as:

- washing and dressing yourself
- household chores
- leisure and social activities

Think about what is important to you. This includes the tasks you have to do, but also the tasks that you want to do, that you enjoy. You may need to adapt the environment, change the task or have help with more physically demanding tasks, like cooking or shopping. Take the opportunity to **gradually** return to independence.



## **Returning to work**

After a period of sickness, it is normal to feel worried about how you will manage getting back to work. Talk to your employer and, if available, your occupational health and human resource services. Many people return to work part-time with a phased return to normal hours. Speak to your occupational therapist for more information and advice.

## **Benefits**

If you are unable to work, it is important to receive the right financial help. The Citizens Advice Service give confidential advice online, over the phone, and in person, for free. Visit **w:** [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk), call, **t:** 0808 223 1133 to check what you can apply for, for example:

- Statutory Sick Pay
- Employment Support Allowance (ESA)
- Personal Independence Payment (PIP)
- Universal Credit

## **Anxiety (stress) management**

Breathlessness can often cause anxiety and feelings of panic. Anxiety tends to make the feeling of breathlessness stronger, which leads to more anxiety.

It is important to remember that breathlessness in itself is not harmful, and you will recover your breathing when you rest. It is also possible to try to control the level of anxiety you are feeling, and relaxation is one way of doing this.

Relaxation is a useful skill that you can learn

## **Preparing for relaxation**

Relaxation is not always easy, but the more you practice, the easier and more effective you will find it. Try to allow yourself some time each day to practice your relaxation exercise.

Tell the people you live with that you will need at least 20 minutes undisturbed, every day to practice relaxation. Make sure the light and temperature of the room is at a comfortable level.

## **Relaxation exercises**

These might be something that you can try with a friend or relative. It might be helpful to have someone read these out to you the first few times you do the exercises, until they become familiar.

## **Visualisation**

Visualising a relaxing scene with your imagination can often help you feel more relaxed. It could be your favourite place, a walk that you know, a garden or the beach. It could also be somewhere from your imagination. Somewhere that makes you feel happy and secure, but not a place that evokes bad or sad memories. Sometimes visualising colours, and images associated with these colours, can also be relaxing.

Here are some examples that you might like to try.

## **Letting go of thoughts**

- Spend a few moments thinking about the pace of your breathing.
- Close your eyes and imagine that you are sitting on the bank of a river.
- You are warm and relaxed, and able to breathe freely.
- You see many leaves slowly drifting downstream.
- When a thought or feeling comes into your mind, try to see this as a leaf and let it drift away from you, then disappear.
- When it's gone, return to gazing at the river, waiting for the next leaf to float by with a new thought.
- Try not to think about the contents of each leaf. Just observe it and then let it go.
- Don't allow yourself to be concerned with these thoughts. Just watch them pass in front of you.

## **Body scan**

Begin by focusing your attention on your feet, trying to release the tension in your muscles.

- First think of your toes, then work up through your ankles to your calves and shins, over your knees and along your thighs.
- Notice how loose your legs feel now.
- Become aware of your tummy and then your chest. Feel the tension releasing in your body.
- Now think of your shoulders, travel down to your elbows, through your forearms, and into your wrists, hands and fingers.
- Become aware even of your fingertips.
- Notice how loose your arms feel now.
- Next, focus your attention on your lower back and pelvis. Try to release any tension you are feeling here.

- Allow this feeling of looseness to rise up your back, to the back of your chest and shoulder blades.
- Continuing up into your neck and scalp, to the crown of your head.
- Slowly begin to focus on your forehead and move down to your jaw.
- Imagine that you have a giant paint brush sweeping over your body, following the same route and creating a feeling of calm and relaxation.
- Feel that every part of your body is relaxed.
- When you finish your relaxation exercise, become aware of your real surroundings by listening to the sounds around you.
- Be aware of how relaxed you feel.
- Start to move very gently by stretching your arms and legs, before you move from your position.

## **Managing changes to your swallowing and voice**

You may experience difficulty swallowing (which can include coughing when eating or drinking) and changes to your voice after coronavirus. This can be because of lots of coughing and/or inflammation from a tube that was inserted into your throat to help you breathe during your illness. These changes are likely to improve as you recover from coronavirus.

### **Safe swallowing strategies**

Difficulty swallowing certain foods, liquids or saliva can occur in varying degrees after coronavirus. Listed below are some general safe swallowing strategies designed to help you with your eating and drinking.

If you notice changes to your swallowing, it is important that you discuss this with your doctor.

- Make sure you are sitting as upright as possible. Even if you are in bed, try and set the bed up so you are as upright as when you sit in a chair.
- Minimise distractions (including talking to people) whenever you are eating and drinking, to make sure you are focused on the task.
- Eat and drink slowly making sure you take one sip and one mouthful at a time.
- Avoid eating and drinking when you are particularly tired. Try having smaller meals more often to allow for fatigue.
- Make sure you maintain regular oral care.

### **General advice for your voice**

- Always aim to use your normal voice. Don't worry if all that comes out is a whisper or a croak. Avoid straining to force the voice to sound louder.
- Avoid attempting to talk over background noise such as music, television or car engine noise, as this causes you to try to be louder, which can be damaging.
- If your voice is no more than a whisper, do not try telephone, online chat, or video conversations. Once your voice starts to improve, avoid prolonged (more than five minutes) voice conversations. Try to use text-based options instead.
- You may notice that your voice fatigues more rapidly than normal. This is to be expected. Take a break from talking when you experience vocal fatigue or soreness in your throat. 30-60 minutes will give your vocal cords time to recover.

- Keep well hydrated as this helps your vocal cords stay well lubricated.
- Use steam inhalations if your throat feels dry. You can do this by putting hot water in a bowl, placing a towel over your head, leaning over the bowl and inhaling. Use hot (but not boiling) water to avoid scalding.
- Try to avoid persistent, deliberate throat clearing and, if you can't prevent it, make it as gentle as possible. Taking small sips of cold water can help to suppress the urge to cough.
- Try to relax when speaking, especially your shoulders, head and neck area
- Until your voice has returned to normal, it is best to avoid 'athletic' vocal activities such as shouting and singing.

### **Are there any things I should avoid?**

- Alcohol
- Cigarettes and vaping.
- Caffeinated drinks
- Spicy foods that may cause acid reflux (acid that comes up from your stomach and irritates your throat).

## **Eating and drinking during or after coronavirus infection**

The symptoms of coronavirus can affect your appetite and ability to eat, making it difficult for you to meet your nutritional needs. Social distancing and social isolation could impact your access to a wide variety of foods, and this might affect how much you eat. Over time this can lead to malnutrition, which can slow down your recovery.

Losing weight without meaning to can be a sign of malnutrition, even if you are overweight. It is important to be aware of your weight and appetite, particularly if you are older or have a pre-existing medical condition. Malnutrition can also increase the risk of frailty, which is more common in older people. Frailty can lead to weaker muscles and make you more vulnerable to infections, falls and needing extra care.

### **What can you do to reduce the risk of malnutrition?**

If you are struggling to eat enough, or if you are losing weight or strength in your muscles, you may need to think differently about the foods you are eating. If you are struggling to eat enough, this information sheet, [w: www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19yellow.pdf](http://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19yellow.pdf) gives some hints and tips to help you.

Good nutrition, including adequate protein (for example, meat, fish, eggs or beans), is vital to protect your muscles. This includes the muscles used when you breathe. Adequate hydration (drinking enough fluids) is also vital for your health. If you have an infection, you need to drink more fluids.

Adults should aim to drink 6-8 mugs or large glasses a day, but may need to drink more if they have a fever. Nourishing drinks such as full fat milk or fruit juice should be considered over water because they provide energy and protein as well as fluid.

## **How do you know if someone is at risk of malnutrition?**

Signs of malnutrition include:

- a reduced appetite or disinterest in food
- unintentional weight loss
- clothes and/or jewellery which used to fit well, but are now fitting loosely.

If you feel you or someone you care for is at risk of malnutrition, you can check by using the Patient's Association Nutrition Checklist found here, [w: www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk/resources-and-tools/patients-association-nutrition-checklist](http://www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk/resources-and-tools/patients-association-nutrition-checklist)

You can ask your GP to refer you to a local dietitian who can provide personal advice.

## **Healthy eating following recovery from coronavirus**

Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight is important to keep you strong and fit and help you fight infection and recover from illness. It is important to think about your weight. Complications and conditions associated with being overweight, such as type 2 diabetes or heart disease, can increase your risk of becoming more seriously ill with coronavirus and can impact your recovery. If your body mass index (BMI) is over 25 and you are thinking of losing weight, doing this during or straight after an illness may not be the best time. Instead, wait until you have recovered fully. Talk to your healthcare professional about when would be the best time for you to lose weight.



This leaflet gives more tips to help maintain a healthy diet, [w: www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19green.pdf](http://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19green.pdf). If you would like help with losing weight, speak to your GP who can refer you to a dietitian or a local weight management programme to discuss this.

### **Accessing food during the coronavirus pandemic**

More information about how to access food during the coronavirus pandemic can be found on our leaflet,

### **Ready meal delivery during coronavirus pandemic.**

#### **Contact us**

Physiotherapy Department, **t:** 020 7188 5082 or 0207188 5089

Occupational Therapy Department, **t:** 020 7188 7188

Nutrition and dietetics Department, **t:** 020 7188 4128, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm.

Speech and Language Therapy Department:

Guy's Hospital, **t:** 020 7188 6233, or

St Thomas' Hospital, **t:** 020 7188 6246, Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)



# Notes

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## **Pharmacy Medicines Helpline**

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

## **Your comments and concerns**

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

**e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

## **Language and accessible support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.

**t:** 020 7188 8815 **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

## **NHS 111**

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111 **w:** [www.111.nhs.uk](http://www.111.nhs.uk)

## **NHS website**

This website gives information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing. **w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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