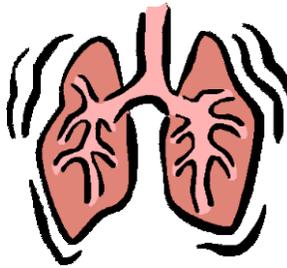


Recovery after COVID-19



This leaflet contains information and advice on:

- **How to manage my breathlessness**
- **How to clear my chest**
- **How to manage anxiety**
- **How to manage my energy and fatigue**
- **How to return to physical fitness**

Recovery from COVID-19 will take time. The length of time needed will vary from person to person and it is important not to compare yourself to others. Ongoing symptoms could last for several months after you contract COVID-19 - this is normal.

Post-COVID-19 effects could include:

- Muscle weakness and joint stiffness
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue) and a lack of energy
- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Sleep problems
- Problems with mental abilities – for example, not being able to remember some events, think clearly and being forgetful
- Changes in your mood, or anxiety or depression
- Nightmares or flashbacks
- Breathlessness
- Cough

How to manage my breathlessness

When recovering from a virus, you may feel breathless on very little exertion. Day to day tasks such as walking, dressing, housework or climbing stairs may make you feel short of breath.

Breathlessness can be frightening and can cause anxiety and panic. Learning to control your breathing can help reduce these feelings.

Tips to help relieve breathlessness

- Don't avoid doing things that make you breathless – becoming more active will help increase muscle strength meaning the lungs don't have to work so hard
- Always stop an activity before you reach your limit so that you have some reserve once you have stopped. You should still be able to speak comfortably
- Slow your pace to match your breathing, don't speed your breathing up to match your pace
- Don't hold your breath. Breathe out on effort. If you hold your breath during the most strenuous part of a movement, it can make you more breathless. For example - breathe out as you stand up or sit down, as you bend down to pick something up, climb stairs or reach into a cupboard.
 - If you do get very breathless during an activity **STOP**
 - Try not to panic. Panic increases your heart rate and use of oxygen and you will feel more breathless
 - Do not try to take deep breaths
 - Do not try to speak

Try the following positions to help your breathlessness

Forward lean sitting



Sit comfortably, leaning forward with your elbows resting loosely on your knees or a table.



High side lying Lie on either side with pillows under your head and shoulders. Your hips and knees should be slightly bent. Make sure

your pillows support your head and shoulders



Standing leaning forward Lean forwards and rest your elbows on to a chair, windowsill, worktop or chair. A walking stick can also be used

Other positions which will help your breathlessness are leaning back against a wall letting your hands hang loosely or sitting upright in a chair

Try these breathing techniques

Breathing control

- helps you to relax and control your shortness of breath.
- Is normal gentle breathing with least effort

Sit comfortably with your shoulders relaxed and feet flat on the floor. You can also do this in high side lying.

Place one hand on your tummy just below the ribs. Breathe in gently through your nose and feel your abdomen rise gently, then exhale slowly through your nose or mouth (but without pushing). You may find it easier to breathe out through pursed lips (see below). Concentrate on letting go of tension and feel your breathing slow down.

Pursed lip breathing

Breathe in gently through your nose, then purse your lips as though you were going to blow out a candle or whistle. Blow out with your lips in this position. Breathe out slowly, for as long as is comfortable; do not force your lungs to empty.

Blow-as-you-go

Use this while you are doing something that makes you breathless. Breathe in before you make the effort. Then breathe out while making the effort eg breathe out as you lift a heavy bag or bend down. Do not hold your breath. It can be helpful to use pursed lip breathing as you blow.

Paced breathing

Use this while you are walking or climbing stairs. Count to yourself as you walk – for example, count 1 as you breathe in and then count either 2 or 3 as you breathe out. You can count for longer as you breathe in or out if that feels better for you.

How to clear my chest

Phlegm is normally present in the lungs. It helps clean, moisten and protect the lungs by trapping inhaled dust and germs. During recovery from a virus, you may have more phlegm than usual.

It is important to clear phlegm from your chest to allow more air to get into your lungs.

This will help you breathe more easily, prevent chest infections and reduce your cough.

Coughing is tiring and bouts of coughing can cause headaches, painful muscles and bladder leakage.

Tips for clearing your lungs

- Try to clear phlegm at regular intervals, never force it up
- Drink at regular intervals (water, juice, tea), this will help thin phlegm
- Keep active, this helps loosen phlegm.

If you have trouble clearing your chest of phlegm, the following technique may help

Active Cycle of Breathing Technique (ACBT)

ACBT is a set of breathing exercises that helps move phlegm, making it easier to cough up.

Choose a comfortable position to perform the technique, keeping the shoulders relaxed

but make sure you are not too slouched. Sitting is a good position.

1. Breathing control

Place one hand on your tummy just below the ribs. Breathe in gently through your nose and feel your abdomen rise gently, then exhale slowly through your nose or mouth (but without pushing).

You may find it easier to breathe out through pursed lips. Concentrate on letting go of tension and feel your breathing slow down. Do this for 30 seconds.

2. Deep breathing exercises

- Take 3-4 deep long slow deep breaths in through your nose, allowing the lower chest to expand. Try to make sure your neck and shoulders remain relaxed
- At the end of the breath in, hold the air for 2-3 seconds. Let the air out gently.

3. Huffing

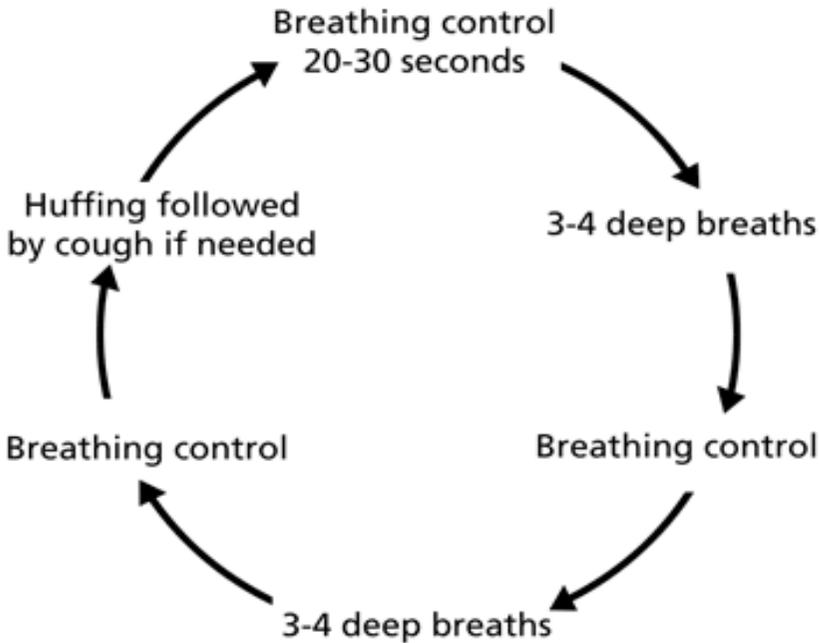
A huff is breathing out with your mouth and throat open instead of coughing. It helps move phlegm so you can clear it in a controlled way. To huff, you squeeze air quickly from your lungs through an open mouth, as if trying to mist up a mirror.

Take a **small long huff** first – this will move phlegm from lower down in your chest. Take a small to medium breath in and then huff until your lungs feel empty.

Then take a **big short huff** when the phlegm feels ready to come out. This will clear phlegm from higher up in the chest. Take a deep breath in and then huff the air out quickly.

You should then repeat the cycle until your chest is clear.

You should always follow deep breathing and huffing with breathing control – see diagram below.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvorhwGZGm8>

If you have a dry troublesome cough

A cough may persist for weeks after you have recovered from the virus. Constant coughing irritates the upper airways making them sore, red and swollen and causing even more coughing. If you do not have any phlegm to clear, try the following tips to help control your cough.

- Nose breathe
- Do your breathing control regularly
- Sip water frequently

- Try sucking liquorice pastilles, a square of dark chocolate, frozen green grapes or ice cubes
- Lemon juice or ginger may also help

How to manage my anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety at some time in their life. It is a normal reaction when we are in danger or under threat. Anxiety can start when we don't feel in control - experiencing a stressful event like the virus or a stay in hospital, can cause anxiety. You may worry this will happen again, and this can make you feel more anxious about the future. This is a normal reaction.

Symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety affects people in different ways. You may have trouble sleeping, have difficulty concentrating or remembering things, experience changes in mood, flashbacks or feel more breathless. You may notice rapid shallow breathing and have difficulty in slowing your breathing down.

Try these tips:

Saying "no"

Try not to take on too much. Too many demands on your time can increase your anxiety.

Exercise

Exercise can help lower anxiety and improve mood. It can also help you sleep better. Doing something active within your capabilities can act as a distraction.

Ask for help

Talking to someone about the problem can make it seem more manageable.

Relaxation

Relaxation is an effective coping skill for dealing with stress and anxiety, reducing breathlessness and easing muscle tension.

- Breathing Control
- Listening to music
- Guided imagery - usually a voice guiding your thoughts to a safe / quiet / calming place (perhaps using a CD)
- Use an activity which focuses you on something else e.g. reading, knitting, crosswords, etc.

[https://www.nhsllothian.scot.nhs.uk/Services/A-Z/painmanagement/Pages/Pain-Management-Programme-\(AAH\).aspx](https://www.nhsllothian.scot.nhs.uk/Services/A-Z/painmanagement/Pages/Pain-Management-Programme-(AAH).aspx)

How to manage my energy and fatigue

Conserving energy isn't about avoiding exercise/activity. You may find you are fatigued when carrying out simple tasks like showering or dressing. Managing your energy is about finding what you can do consistently without increasing your symptoms.

Exercise

Increasing your fitness will improve your health. Being fitter will help you manage tasks and chores more easily (ref HED). Gradually return to previous activities or interests. Make sure you take regular rests throughout the day.

Boom and Bust

This is peaks of over-activity (boom) followed by troughs of under-activity (bust). On a good day, when you feel you have more energy you may feel tempted to do all those jobs you have been putting off. This results in fatigue and more breathlessness which may last a few days, forcing you to rest. After a few days you feel better and overdo it again, repeating the cycle. Every time you “bust” you will lose more fitness meaning you are able to do less even on the good (“boom”) days. You can avoid this by pacing yourself.

Pacing

Pacing is the opposite of Boom and Bust. It is learning to recognise how much you can do so you avoid feeling exhausted. By slowing down or stopping before you feel exhausted you will find you can restart an activity sooner and need less rest. Pacing is especially important when you are breathless or tired. Keep to a steady pace during tasks; don't rush. Plan regular rest periods during the day.

Try:

- To have regularly planned rests during the day
- Avoid hurrying
- Avoid large meals or activities for an hour after eating
- Use breathing techniques such as “blow as you go”
- Make sure your home is well ventilated and avoid strong odours
- Sit during tasks eg in when washing or dressing or preparing meals
- Minimise arm movements especially above the head eg use a towelling robe rather than a towel to dry yourself
- Try to avoid bending, reaching and twisting – organise your things so they are within easy reach; use long handled equipment such as “helping hands”
- Use good body mechanics – if you have to move something, push rather than pull, slide objects rather than lift. If you do need to lift something, use your leg muscles by bending your knees, keep the object close to you and “blow as you go”

- Do one thing at a time
- Set small goals, stick to your plan and practice regularly

This information should not replace any individual advice you may have received on discharge from hospital. If you have any concerns about ongoing or worsening symptoms, please seek advice from either your GP or the NHS 111 website.

- **www.111.nhs.uk**
- A support hub has been set up by Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation to provide information and dedicated support for people who have been diagnosed with Covid-19 and their family members.
- This can be accessed at:
- **<https://www.post-covid.org.uk/>**

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