

# MANAGING BREATHLESSNESS WITH LONG COVID

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# This Essential Guide is about managing breathlessness if you have Long Covid.

## It explains:

- what Long Covid is
- what breathlessness is
- what you can do to help manage your breathlessness
- where to get additional advice and support.



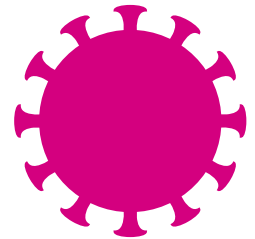
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## What is Long Covid?

Many people recover quickly from COVID-19, but some may take longer to get better.

When the symptoms are ongoing for 12 or more weeks, this is referred to as Long Covid.

Whether or not you develop Long Covid does not seem to be linked to how ill you were when you first get coronavirus or if you were hospitalised because of it. People who had mild symptoms of coronavirus at first can still develop Long Covid.




# Long Covid and breathlessness

After contracting coronavirus, you may feel out of breath and have difficulty breathing as part of your daily life. This is called breathlessness. Breathlessness is one of the most common Long Covid symptoms. Living with breathlessness can be difficult. It can affect you physically and emotionally.

The good news is that there are many things you can do at home to help your breathlessness, including:


- Using breathing control techniques
- Using different breathing positions
- Balancing staying active with relaxation, ensuring that you stay comfortable.

 If you are experiencing breathlessness you should speak to your GP in case it is caused by something other than coronavirus.

# What does breathlessness feel like?

If you feel breathless you might notice that:

- your chest feels tight
- it is harder to fill up your lungs
- you gasp for air or find it hard to catch your breath
- it is hard to control your breathing
- you feel exhausted
- you feel anxious or panicky
- your heart feels like it is racing.

 Breathlessness can either come on suddenly, or slowly get worse over time. Everyone experiences breathlessness differently.

# Managing your breathlessness

There are several ways to manage breathlessness. See what works for you.

## This may include:



medication to relax airways, support lung health, or address heart problems



using breathing techniques



learning how to pace yourself



living a healthy lifestyle

You should discuss with your doctor whether medication may be needed, or if a treatment such as pulmonary rehabilitation (discussed later in this booklet) might help.

# Breathing control techniques

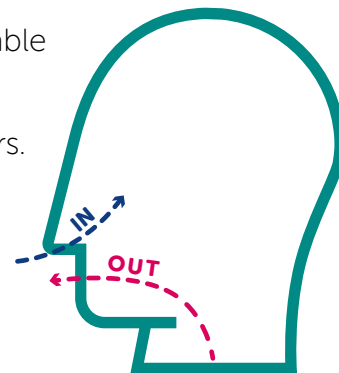
These involve gentle breathing using your diaphragm (your main breathing muscle).

Ask your doctor or nurse about what techniques may be best for you. Practice them and use them as much as possible.

Some examples include:

## Relaxed, slow, deep breathing

- Get into a comfortable position.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Breathe in gently through your nose, then out through your mouth.



## Pursed-lips breathing

Breathe in through your nose, then out through your mouth with your lips pursed, like you are whistling. This helps to slow your breathing down.

## Blow as you go

Breathe in first before you do the activity and breathe out when doing the activity.

You can do this when you are doing an activity that needs a lot of effort, for example, when you are standing up or bending down.

## Paced breathing

Breathe in and out in time with the activity you are doing. For example, when walking up stairs, breathe in on one step and breathe out on the next step.

# Breathing positions

If you feel breathless, different standing or sitting positions can help your breathing recover and help you breathe more easily.

What works best for you will depend on where you are and what you are doing.

①



- Sit down and lean forward.
- Rest both arms on your thighs.
- Relax your hands and wrists.

②



- Sit upright with your back against the back of a chair.
- Rest both hands on your thighs.
- Relax your hands and wrists.

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- Stand up.
- Lean forward with your arms resting on a ledge, for example, a windowsill, bench, handrail or back of a chair.

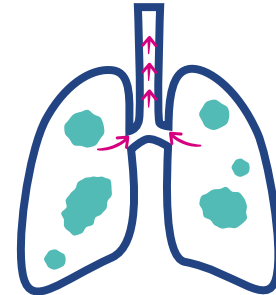
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- Stand up and lean with your back against a wall.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Rest your arms down by your sides.
- If it feels comfortable, move your feet about 30cm away from the wall.
- Keep your feet slightly apart.

## Chest clearing exercises

- Mucus (also called phlegm, sputum or spit) can build up in your lungs and make you feel more breathless.
- Getting rid of this mucus may help you to breathe more easily.
- Your doctor may refer you to a respiratory (chest) physiotherapist if your condition requires it. They will show you what exercises you can do to help clear your lungs and tell you how often to do them.



# Breathing at night

If you feel more breathless at night, these tips may help:

Use your breathing control techniques.

If you have one, keep your inhaler, spacer or nebuliser within easy reach.

Keep a fan by your bed and turn it on when you feel breathless.

Try sleeping in an upright position, using pillows to support you.

If you wake up breathless, sit up and lean forward - it can help to sit at the edge of the bed, with your feet on the ground, and lean your arms on a bedside table.

Keep a glass of water next to your bed.

Use your chest clearing techniques if needed.

# Pulmonary (lung) rehabilitation

Pulmonary rehabilitation (PR) is a free programme of exercise, education and support. It is run by healthcare professionals to help people with lung problems to:

- manage your condition
- control your breathing
- increase your fitness
- improve your quality of life.

Studies in other conditions show that PR can help to reduce breathlessness and make you feel better. If you think it may help, you can discuss a PR referral with your health professional.

PR may be set up differently, or unavailable due to COVID restrictions. This is an ongoing situation and should be discussed at referral.



# Healthy Living

## Stop smoking

Smoking damages your lungs, causes mucus to build up in your airways and narrows your airways. All these things can make breathlessness worse. If you need help quitting, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for information or call **Quit Your Way Scotland** on **0800 848 484**.



## Manage your weight, eat well and drink sensibly

Managing your weight, eating a healthy, balanced diet and limiting your alcohol intake are important for your general health and to help avoid or fight future chest infections. Extra weight around the abdomen and chest can also put your lungs under more strain and worsen breathlessness.



## Keeping active

Regular physical activity can help with your breathlessness, increase your energy levels and improve your overall health.

However, if you feel unwell after activity, it's vital that you do not push yourself to do more. If you are struggling with your level of activity, listen to your body and take it back down.



If activities like dressing, washing or cooking make you breathless, speak to your doctor about a referral to an occupational therapist. Your occupational therapist may then be able to arrange equipment or aids to help.



## Tips for getting active



Pace yourself - don't overdo it



Remember to use your breathing control techniques.



Don't stop doing the things you enjoy. Try short periods of activity or small tasks and gradually build up the number that you do.



Set small, realistic goals.



Even housework and other small tasks count!



Plan for your breathlessness when leaving the house - arrange support, aids, or someone to go with you.

## Pacing Yourself

Pacing is about managing your activities each day so you don't get worse or overdo it.

Try to avoid doing lots of things one day, but then doing nothing the next few days. Instead, pace yourself and spread out what you're doing during the week. It's normal for your energy levels to be different on different days.

If you begin to feel more tired and unwell as you increase the amount of activity you are doing, continue at your current level until you feel more comfortable.

If you need more information on pacing, or support with fatigue, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is developing resources for this. Check out our website: [www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)



# Managing anxiety

Some people feel anxious, frightened or panic if they feel like their breathing is out of control.

Learning to recognise when and why you feel anxious can be the first step to feeling more in control.

Doing breathing exercises, listening to relaxing music and using mindfulness techniques can help.



If your breathlessness is making you feel anxious or affecting your mood, it is important to speak to your doctor or other health professional about how you are feeling.

# Help from family and friends

Your family and friends can help you manage your breathlessness by:

keeping you calm and reassuring you

helping you to get into a comfortable breathing position

doing your breathing control techniques with you

joining you when you do any exercise or physical activity

offering you a sense of security when you leave your comfort zone.

# Know when to get medical help

Breathlessness isn't the same for everyone. People may experience different symptoms on different days or at different times.

It is important to know what is 'normal' for you. This will help you to recognise if you are getting more breathless than usual.

If you feel more breathless than usual it is important to tell your doctor.

Ask your doctor for a referral to a physiotherapist if you are struggling with pacing and activity. A specialist physiotherapist may be able to help you manage your symptoms in the best way for you.



## Keep track of your symptoms



Use the sheets on the following pages to keep track of your symptoms and activity. This will help you monitor your breathlessness. Recording how your breathlessness alters in response to different factors - such as activity levels, stress or times of day/night can help you to identify trigger factors and patterns. Becoming aware of this allows you to plan your work or activities effectively, change how you do things so you can manage your breathlessness better.

For the most up-to-date information on Long Covid, go to NHS Inform:  
**[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)**





Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to **[www.chss.org.uk/publications](http://www.chss.org.uk/publications)** for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: [adviceline@chss.org.uk](mailto:adviceline@chss.org.uk).

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to **[www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus)** to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

**If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.**

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**NO LIFE HALF LIVED**

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