



Western Health  
and Social Care Trust



# Your Post COVID-19 Recovery Plan





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# Foreword

Your recent experience of COVID-19, whether you were hospitalised or able to stay at home, may continue to affect you both physically and psychologically for some time.

The recovery period may challenge you on many levels, physically, emotionally, mentally and might take longer than you anticipate. To support your recovery it is important to be gentle with yourself initially and not expect too much of yourself, then slowly aim to reach your next goal as you recover.

For further information about any of the topics in this booklet, **click on the bold web addresses** throughout and in the **Further Support** section.

# Introduction

This guide has been developed to help you manage your symptoms and to support your recovery plan. It contains information and advice on a number of areas which will be helpful to you.

People recovering from COVID-19 can have some of the following common symptoms:

- Difficulty concentrating or being more forgetful
- Low mood and/or feeling more anxious
- Fatigue and body aches
- Breathlessness
- Poor appetite
- Lack of smell or taste
- Speech and/or swallowing difficulties
- Poor sleep.

Use the **“little and often”** approach to aid your recovery. Everyone’s experience of recovery is different. Look after yourself, follow the advice information and tips in the booklet and make sure that you ask for help if you feel that you need extra support.

Get well soon.

# Managing Breathlessness

Being short of breath can make you feel frightened and exhausted.

Shortness of breath is a major symptom of COVID-19 which can lead to feelings of anxiety and disability.

The most important thing to achieve is to gain control of your breathlessness so that it does not control you!

Tips for controlling breathlessness include:

- **Pursed lip breathing** Technique allows you to breathe in through your nose and slowly out through your mouth with your lips pursed – as if you are getting ready to blow out a candle. Repeat 3-5 times
- **Rectangular breathing** Focus on a rectangular object, allowing your eyes to follow the shape of the rectangle (it can be a window/table) and each short side you breathe in for the count of 3 and at the long sides you breathe out for the count of 6, repeating this sequence up to 5 times
- **Tummy breathing** In a comfortable position place the palm of your hand on your lower tummy. Breathing in slowly through your nose, feel your tummy rise and as you breathe out it should fall. Continue to breathe in and out slowly for 5 repetitions and when you have gained control, your breath out like all techniques should be longer than your breath in
- **Blow as you go** This is an excellent technique to use when completing a task that makes you breathless. Before you do the task breathe in and as completing the task breathe out using pursed lips. This technique is beneficial when completing tasks such as lifting an object, reaching above your head, standing up or physical exertion such as climbing the stairs.

## Positions of Ease

Poor posture, i.e. shoulders that are tensed or hunched over, can also lead to increased shortness of breath, because your chest cannot expand to its full capacity.

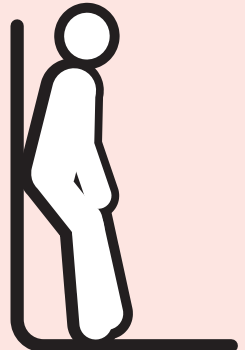
Changing your body position while sitting or standing can help you breathe better. These images will guide you on positions of ease to help with breathlessness.

Lie on your side with pillows under your head and shoulders. Make sure your top pillow supports your neck. Slightly bend your knees, hips and top leg. Resting your upper arm on a pillow may also help.



Rest your head and arms on pillows on a table. Relax down onto the pillows as much as possible. Having your legs apart may also help.

Have your feet slightly apart, about 30cms away from the wall. Relax your hands down by your sides or into your lap. Lean your hips on the wall and allow your shoulders to relax whilst leaning forward slightly.



# Fatigue

It is very common for people to experience fatigue whilst recovering from illness. This is particularly the case when you have experienced an illness which has affected your breathing. When your body is low on oxygen, you can feel more tired.

Fatigue describes the feeling of having very low energy for everyday activities. It can mean that you have low stamina as well, and you will need to use the energy you have wisely. Whilst you need to take care not to push yourself too hard, it is important to try to build up your energy levels by increasing your activity levels over time.

## Pace Yourself

You may find that tasks are more challenging for you and you may need to take regular breaks when doing activities, in order to complete them. This is known as 'pacing'. You may need to prioritise key tasks and be careful not to overdo it on days when you feel more energised.

There are things you can do to help manage your fatigue and help with your energy levels. It is important to maintain a healthy lifestyle, eating well and getting regular exercise.

## Breathing to Support Energy

Practising breathing exercises can help when you are tired or short of breath. It is also important to get regular sleep every night so that your body will have the energy it needs to work. Refer to page 4 for ways to support your breathing.



# Psychological Recovery

It's normal and understandable, at this time, to have mixed feelings and thoughts about your health and recovery.

During recovery, our bodies and brains' **biggest needs are the basics including** daily routine, sleep, physical activity, time to relax and connect. Remember to be kind to yourself, do what you are able to do by listening to your body.

Take time each day to support your recovery by trying the following:

- Establish a daily routine around sleep, meals and activity times
- Set small, achievable goals to help monitor your progress and gives a sense of achievement
- Taking time to relax and do the things you enjoy
- Enjoy regular mindful moments - slow down and notice the world around you
- Pause and enjoy taking 3 deep breaths
- Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings and be kind and supportive with yourself. If you are having a difficult day ask yourself, 'What would I say to a friend if they were feeling this way, what would help them? Reflect on how you dealt with similar thoughts and feelings in the past and what helped
- Name it to tame it - If possible talk about your experience, how you feel and what you need with family or friend. This can help you to make sense of your experience and help others to best help you
- Connect with friends and family, even if you don't feel like it. Social connection helps in your recovery, why not send a text or postcard to someone you care about?

# Swallowing

General weakness and fatigue related to the virus means you may experience more difficulty with eating, drinking and swallowing as you recover from COVID.

You may also notice that you cough or choke more easily. Eating and drinking might take more effort than usual; you may become tired more easily or feel breathless at times.

Here are some things you can do to help manage eating and swallowing as you recover:

- When you are eating or drinking, always sit up fully. Imagine the position you normally sit at a table, if you are in bed try to achieve a position as close to this as possible to this
- Stop and rest if you are feeling breathless or tired
- Eat/drink **MORE SLOWLY** than you normally would
- After swallowing food or taking a sip of fluid give yourself a recovery break/pause to allow your breathing to return to normal before you take another sip/bite. This will reduce the risk of food/drink going down the wrong way
- You may find you get tired when eating and drinking so it may be easier to eat small amounts of food regularly rather than a full meal. i.e. 'little and often'
- Take small sips or bites. The bigger the piece of food the more effort is involved to chew it. Larger drinks are harder to control in the mouth than small sips
- If you are getting tired or out of breath when chewing, try eating softer foods that require less chewing.

If you are following this advice but are still having swallowing problems, or you have any of the following symptoms:

- Coughing/choking on food or drink
- Recurrent chest infections
- Food sticking in mouth/throat
- Eyes watering when eating/drinking
- Regurgitation
- 'Wet' voice
- Being unable to chew food properly.

Please contact your local Speech & Language Therapy Department.

**Altnagelvin Hospital: 028 7161 1428**

or

**South West Acute Hospital: 028 6638 2547**

# Mouth Care, Speech and Communication

Breathing masks to aid your recovery can dry out your mouth so it is particularly important to keep your mouth moist and clean particularly if you have had any help with your breathing in hospital. Mouth care is important to help prevent dryness and future infections.

You may experience a dry or sore mouth, cracked lips or bad breath during your recovery. To look after your mouth:

- Brush your teeth twice a day using toothpaste
- Drink plenty of fluids (Regular sips throughout the day)
- If you wear dentures, remove them and clean both the dentures and your mouth twice a day and always take your dentures out at night.

If you have been in ICU you may not have been using your throat muscles for a long time. This can cause your voice to sound weak or husky and your speech may sound different. You may have a sore throat if you have been coughing a lot or if you needed a breathing tube in hospital. This should improve as your overall symptoms resolve.

Tips to look after your voice and make talking easier:

- Sit in an upright position and take a breath in before talking
- Speak in shorter sentences
- Reduce background noise when communicating with others e.g. Turn down radio or TV
- Avoid shouting or forcing your voice out
- Stay hydrated by drinking water regularly
- Reduce caffeine and alcohol intake as these dry your mouth
- If your voice feels tired stop, rest and try later.

# Nutrition and Your Recovery

Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight is important in your recovery from illness.

## General Healthy Eating Tips

If you have a good appetite and haven't experienced any weight loss as a result of your illness you should aim to eat a healthy balanced diet. More information can be found on NHS live well eat well

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>

Eating well tips during and after COVID-19 Illness

[www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19green.pdf](http://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19green.pdf)

## Supporting Your Appetite

It is normal to experience a poor appetite or to feel fuller more quickly when eating after an illness.

Some ways to help you get your appetite back are:

- Eat foods that you enjoy
- Eat little and often - small, frequent meals and snacks are good
- Aim to eat regular meal and snacks every day, especially do not to miss or skip meals
- Have drinks separate from meals to avoid filling up too quickly
- Use a smaller plate or bowl at meal times to help you feel less overwhelmed
- Chew your food, take time to eat and enjoy eating at a slower pace.

## Making the Most of What you are Able to eat

There are simple additions you can make to meals and snacks to increase the calorie content and nutritional intake without making the portions too big to manage:

- Add butter, cream and or grated cheese to mashed potato, vegetables and pasta dishes
- Spread margarine, butter, nut butter, chocolate spread or jam generously onto bread, crackers, biscuits or scones
- Choose full fat and full cream products such as whole milk and creamy yogurts and try to avoid low fat or 'light' products
- Add sugar, jam, honey, skimmed milk powder or cream to porridge, breakfast cereals or puddings
- Fortifying milk by adding 4 heaped tablespoons (60g) of skimmed milk powder to a pint of whole milk.

## Protein

Protein is especially important for building your strength after illness. Not eating enough protein, particularly for long periods of time, may lead to muscle weakness, frailty and slow recovery from illness:

- Aim to include a protein source (such as meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses, nuts or tofu) at each meal
- Eat milky puddings/desserts such as yogurts or custard
- Drink milky drinks like milkshakes, milky coffee or hot chocolate  
If you are finding it difficult to consume enough protein in your diet talk to your healthcare professional.

For more information on nutrition and your recovery:

- Improving your Nutrition during and after COVID-19 illness  
<https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19yellow.pdf>
- Nutrition Support during and after COVID-19 illness  
<https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19red.pdf>

### How to Manage Changes to Taste and Smell

It is common to experience changes in taste and smell ranging from a bland taste to a metallic or salty taste. To help manage this:

1. Keep your mouth clean and fresh by brushing your teeth twice a day or after every meal
2. Try cooking with various herbs, spices, pepper and add condiments to meals to enhance the flavour
3. If you struggle with hot foods eat cold foods instead
4. Take regular sips of drinks throughout the day although avoid fizzy drinks
5. Try using plastic cutlery to help with the metallic taste.

### Vitamin D

During isolation at home you may not get enough sunshine for your body to produce vitamin D. Try to spend some time outdoors each day if you are able and consider taking a vitamin D supplement. The UK recommended supplement dosage is 10 micrograms of vitamin D per day.

## Ask for Help

Social distancing, isolation and feeling unwell can make it difficult to go shopping for the foods you need.

If you need help with grocery shopping you can ask family, friends or neighbours.

If you have no one to help with your shopping, are unable afford food or unable to access local support networks, local Councils are distributing food parcels to local foodbanks for onward delivery to those in need. For more information contact Coronavirus community helpline on **0808 80 200 20** or follow advice on **[www.adviceni.net](http://www.adviceni.net)**



# Physical Activity

Being physically active is important to aid your recovery and overall health.

There are many benefits to being more active, including:

- Building up and strengthening weakened muscles
- A stronger heart and finding it easier to breathe
- Increased energy
- Better sleep, improved mood and feeling of wellbeing
- Improved resistance to infection.

## How to Start?

Start by reducing the time you spend sitting. It can be easy to sit for long periods of time, such as watching TV, reading or browsing the internet. Sitting too long without breaks increases body weight and weakens muscles so your heart and lungs have to work harder when you do move. Move more often. Even a small change can make a big difference. Are there any long periods of sitting that you can change?

## Be More Active

Find an activity you enjoy e.g. walking, gardening or cycling. Start off slowly to warm up the body and then gradually increase from rest to exercise, enjoy the activity then gradually cool down the body. For best results exercise at a level that leaves you a little out of breath but still able to comfortably hold a conversation. Try to walk/exercise continuously without stopping. Do what you can manage until it feels easier. Then gradually walk/exercise for a little longer or faster.

Getting in and out of a chair a few times or using the bottom step of stairs to step up and down can also be a great work out.

### Track Your Activity

Keep a note of how active you are and aim to walk a little bit faster or a little further every day. You can use apps on your phone or smart watch that can track your step count.

NB If you are feeling unwell or have a temperature, avoid exercise until you are feeling better. If your exercise has been interrupted for several days, reduce your level initially and gradually build back up.

# Sleep

Getting enough sleep is directly linked to your health and wellbeing. You might notice that your sleep pattern has been affected, and even though you feel more tired than usual, you still may have difficulty getting to sleep or you may find that you wake up frequently during the night if you are worrying about things.

It can take time to get back to sleep in a normal routine. These sleep tips can help:

- Keep normal wake and sleep times. Avoid long naps especially in the late afternoon as this can make it difficult to get to sleep at night
- Enjoy your caffeine before noon also be mindful that alcohol disrupts and impairs sleep
- Avoid food high in sugar for a couple of hours before bedtime, eating a heavy meal close to bedtime can impact on your ability to fall asleep and stay asleep
- Unwind for an hour before your intended bedtime. Do something you feel relaxes you, dim the lights and switch off from technology as blue light from devices has been proven to disrupt sleep
- Getting enough natural daylight and physical activity are important for better sleep at night, though avoid exercise close to bedtime. If current government advice allows you to go outside then go for a gentle walk first thing in the morning. If you can go outside then this is best, however if this is not possible then try to use the spaces in your home creatively

- To help to manage stress or anxiety, calm and clear your mind using deep breathing or muscle relaxation techniques or keep a notebook and pen beside your bed to write down thoughts or worries
- Keep your bedroom gadget free, quiet, cool and dark.

Listen to your body's natural cues for sleep. If you ignore and stay up later you may miss the optimal time for sleep.

If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, or if you wake up and cannot get back to sleep, it may be that you need to adjust your sleeping position if you are experiencing difficulties with breathlessness, and might need to use an extra pillow for a while. Otherwise get up and do something that relaxes you in dim light, returning to bed when you feel sleepy.

Over time your sleep habits should improve. However if you continue to experience problems, please speak with your GP who can help advise on ways to manage your sleep better.

# Smoking Cessation

The medical advice is clear - Stop Smoking.

This is a really good time to remain a non-smoker to further support your recovery from COVID 19.

There are so many immediate and long lasting benefits of stopping smoking. The sooner a smoker quits, the more likely the reversal of damage caused by smoking can begin as the body starts to recover.

## Health Benefits of Stopping Smoking:

- Breathing improves within 48 hours as nicotine and carbon monoxide are eliminated from the body
- Sense of taste and smell improve within 3 days
- Circulation within the body improves during 3 months, helping blood flow more easily to hands and feet
- After 5 years the risk of heart attack is halved and the risk of lung cancer is reduced.

### Smoking Cessation Tips:

- Decide to stop smoking and be clear for your reasons for doing so e.g. health, family, money
- Just do it. Set a quit date. You can do this!
- Seek support from the WHSCT Smoking Cessation service\*. You are 4 times more likely to succeed
- Prepare for temptation. Change your daily routine to avoid situations when you usually smoked, reduce stress in your life and develop other coping mechanisms
- Focus on the money you will save and treat yourself to something nice as a reward
- Prepare for withdrawal symptoms as your body recovers like headaches, sleep disturbances and coughing which are normal
- Create a smokefree home for your new and improved smoke free life.

\*The Smoking Cessation team consist of specialist nurses trained to provide support and prescribe Nicotine Replacement Therapies for those wishing to stop smoking.

Contact Stop Smoking Helpline Number **0800 91 79 388** for further support and information.

# Further Support to Help Your Recovery

## Managing Breathlessness

British Lung Foundation

<https://www.blf.org.uk/search/site/breathlessness>

Fatigue

<https://thelimbic.com/uk/respiratory/no-need-to-reinvent-the-wheel-on-post-covid-rehab-programmes-say-clinicians/>

[https://covidpatientsupport.lthtr.nhs.uk/#/lessons/6Aj2\\_QAlzcQ9\\_PQJ0eNrBQWFJX9Jf5r0](https://covidpatientsupport.lthtr.nhs.uk/#/lessons/6Aj2_QAlzcQ9_PQJ0eNrBQWFJX9Jf5r0)

## Psychological Recovery

Below are links for further information and advice to support your psychological recovery at home. However, if you continue to feel concerned about your mental health or you feel your symptoms are getting worse, contact your GP for support.

Stress Control online course

[www.stresscontrol.org](http://www.stresscontrol.org)

ICU steps

[www.icusteps.org](http://www.icusteps.org)

NHS Anxiety Tips

[www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips)

NHS Staying at Home Tips

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips/>

Parentline NI Free Helpline **0808 8020 400**

Childline **[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)** or **0800 1111**

Mental wellbeing while staying at home  
**<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/corona-virus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips/>**

If you are struggling with thoughts of life not worth living seek urgent help from your **GP** or by contacting **Lifeline 0800 808 8000** or Samaritans **[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)** or **08457 090909**

## **Physical Activity**

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

## **Speech and Communication**

Altnagelvin Hospital **028 7161 1428**  
South West Acute Hospital **028 6638 2547**

## **Nutrition and Your Recovery**

How to make fortified milk  
**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mExRhghQKTE>**

Basic store cupboard ideas BDA- OPSG  
**[www.bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/275073a5-06cc-473f-b349ca768124e72f/200406-BDA-OPSG-Store-cupboard-Flier-V2-A4-version.pdf](http://www.bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/275073a5-06cc-473f-b349ca768124e72f/200406-BDA-OPSG-Store-cupboard-Flier-V2-A4-version.pdf)**



If you have a health condition such as diabetes or heart disease some of the dietary advice in this leaflet may be less suitable for you. Contact your local Community Dietetic Department.

Shantallow Health Centre, Co. Londonderry  
**(028) 7135 5014**

Omagh Health Primary Care Centre, Co. Tyrone  
**(028) 8283 5553**

South West Acute Hospital, Co. Fermanagh  
**(028) 6638 2007**

Diabetes Network Office  
**(028) 7161 1354**

## **Sleep**

Sleep Scotland  
**[www.sleepscotland.org](http://www.sleepscotland.org)**

Millpond  
**[www.millpondsleepclinic.com](http://www.millpondsleepclinic.com)**

The Children's Sleep Charity  
**[www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk](http://www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk)**

National Sleep Foundation  
**[www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)**

The Sleep Council  
**[www.sleepcouncil.org.uk](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk)**

## Smoking Cessation

Public Health Agency (PHA) quit kits and information on smoking

<https://www.stopsmokingni.info/>

## Advice NI

If you are shielding and have any further concerns contact Advice NI COVID-19 Community Response Line

**0800 80 200 20** Monday to Friday or visit

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>





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