Recovery after coronavirus (COVID-19)

Managing physical symptoms of breathlessness, fatigue, and anxiety
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, sore throat, cough, 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 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 all 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 you to use your energy on? Try to keep your ‘jug’ at least a quarter full 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.
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.
Useful sources of information

ICU Steps. Support for patients and their families.
w: www.icusteps.org

Contact us
If you have any questions, please contact the Physiotherapy Department, t: 020 7188 5082 or 020 7188 5089, Monday to Friday, 8.30am-5pm.

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

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
t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)
e: 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

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