

# Support for Recovery and Self-Management After COVID-19 Related Illness

## WHO IS THIS HANDOUT FOR?

This handout is a guide for adults who had COVID-19. It provides information on the following areas:

- Managing breathlessness
- Exercising safely
- Managing problems with attention, memory, and thinking clearly
- Managing self-care and fatigue

## MANAGING BREATHLESSNESS

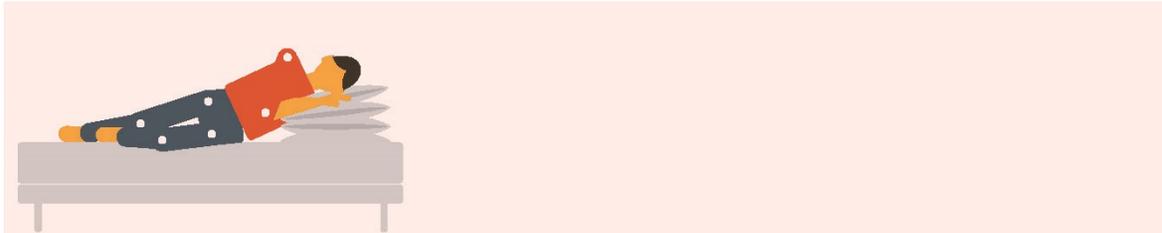
It is common to experience breathlessness after being ill with COVID-19. You may notice you feel weaker and less fit. You can become breathless easily.

Feeling breathless can make you feel anxious, which can make the breathlessness worse. Try to stay calm. Learn ways to “Pace, Prioritize and Plan” out your activities to help with your breathlessness. Your breathing should improve as you slowly increase your activities and exercise. If you have breathlessness, try the positions and techniques listed on the following pages. They can be helpful. Not all positions will work for everyone.

*\* If you start to feel severely short of breath and it does not get better with these positions or techniques, contact your health care provider.*

## POSITIONS TO EASE BREATHLESSNESS

Some positions may help your breathlessness. Try them to see which ones help. You can also try the breathing techniques, described on the next page, while in any of these positions.



### 1. High side lying

Lying on your side propped up by pillows, supporting your head and neck, with your knees slightly bent.



### 2. Forward lean sitting

Sitting at a table, lean forwards from the waist with your head and neck resting on the pillow, and your arms resting on the table. You can also try this without the pillows.



### 3. Forward lean sitting (no table in front)

Sitting on a chair, lean forwards to rest your arms on your lap or the armrests of the chair.



### 4. Forward lean standing

While standing, lean forwards onto a windowsill or other stable surface.



### 5. Standing with back support

Lean with your back against a wall and your hands by your side. Have your feet about a foot away from the wall and slightly apart.

## BREATHING TECHNIQUES

### Controlled Breathing

This type of breathing will help you to relax and control your breathing.

- Sit in a comfortable and supported position.
- Put one hand on your chest and the other hand on your stomach.
- Close your eyes if it helps you relax. Focus on your breathing.
- Slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- As you breathe, you should feel the hand on your stomach rise more than the hand on your chest.
- Try to use as little effort as possible. Try to make your breathing slow, relaxed, and smooth.



### Paced breathing

This is useful to practice when carrying out activities that might take more effort or make you breathless, like climbing the stairs or walking up a hill. It is important to remember that there is no need to rush.

### Paced Breathing

This type of breathing is helpful to practice when you complete activities that might take more effort or make you breathless. Climbing the stairs or walking up a hill can be hard. Try not to rush.

- Think about breaking the task up into small steps. These steps will make it easier. You will not get as tired or breathless.
- Breathe in before you perform the task, such as before you climb up the step.
- Breathe out while you perform the task, such as when you climb up the step.
- You may find it helpful to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

## **EXERCISE AFTER COVID-19 (WAIT 10 TO 14 DAYS)**

Exercising safely is important even if you did not have trouble with walking and exercising before you became sick. Avoid intense exercise or over-exercising for the first 4 to 6 weeks after COVID-19. Begin with warm-up exercises. Follow your workouts with cool-down exercises.

Below are some tips to exercise at the right level.

## **BENEFITS OF EXERCISING AFTER COVID-19**

Exercises can improve your fitness, breathlessness, muscle strength, balance, and thinking. They can reduce stress and improve your mood. Exercising can help you rebuild your confidence and improve your energy. Find ways to stay motivated. Keep track of your progress with a diary or exercise app on your phone.

## **HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM EXERCISING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL?**

- If you can speak a whole sentence without stopping and are not feeling breathless, then you can exercise a bit harder.
- If you can speak a sentence, pausing once or twice to catch your breath, and are moderately to almost severely breathless, then you are exercising at the right level. It is normal to feel a bit breathless when you exercise. It is not harmful or dangerous. Gradually build up your exercise level to help you become less breathless.
- If you cannot speak at all or can only say a word at a time and are severely breathless, then you are exercising too hard.
- If you feel too breathless to speak, stop to rest until your breathing feels more controlled. Try one of the positions on Page 2 to relieve your breathlessness.
- **Avoid high intensity exercises during the first 4 to 6 weeks you are recovering.**

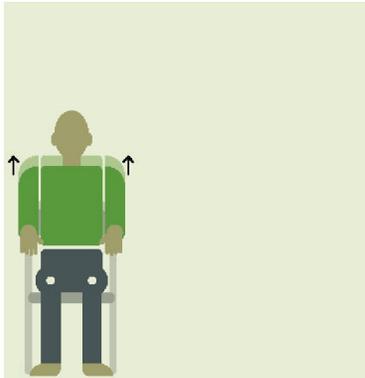
**REMINDER: Stop exercising and contact your primary care provider if you:**

- **become increasingly breathless and it does not improve with rest, or**
- **have chest pain, nausea, or lightheadedness.**

## WARM-UP AND COOL-DOWN EXERCISES

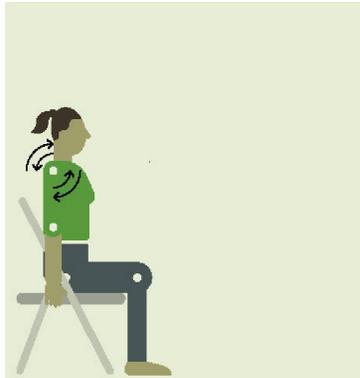
Warming up prepares your body for exercise to prevent injury. Your warm-up should last around 5 minutes. You should feel slightly breathless at the end. Warm-up exercises can be done sitting or standing.

If you complete your warm-up in standing, hold onto a stable surface for support if needed. Repeat each movement 2 to 4 times. Complete the same exercises for 5 minutes. Then, complete the same exercises at the end to cool down. You can also walk at a slow pace for 2 minutes to warm-up or cool-down.



### 1. Shoulder shrugs

Slowly lift your shoulders up towards your ears and then down again



### 2. Shoulder circles

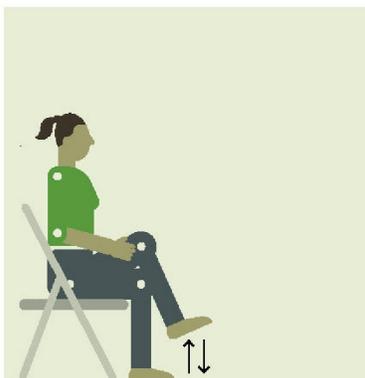
Keeping your arms relaxed by your side or resting on your lap, slowly move your shoulders round in a circle forwards, and then backwards



### 3. Side bends

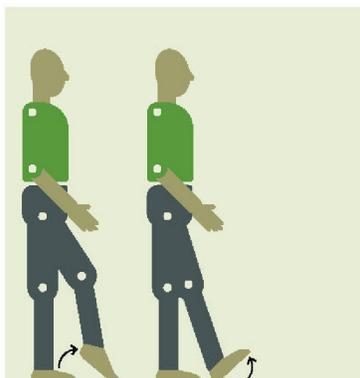
Start with your body straight and your arms by your sides

Slide one arm, then the other, a short way towards the floor, bending sideways



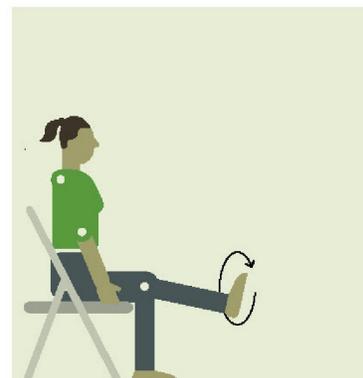
### 4. Knee lifts

Lift your knees up and down slowly, no higher than your hip, one at a time



### 5. Ankle taps

Firstly, using one foot, tap your toes and then your heel on the ground in front of you; repeat with the other foot



### 6. Ankle circles

Using one foot, draw circles with your toes; repeat with the other foot

## FITNESS OR ENDURANCE EXERCISES

You should aim to complete fitness exercises for 20 to 30 minutes, 5 days each week. You may need to start slower. Give yourself time to build up to it. Add a bit into your routine daily. Examples of different types of fitness exercises are described below. Any activity that makes you feel moderately to almost severely breathless can count towards fitness exercise.

Time your fitness exercises and keep a log. Gradually build up the amount of time you can manage. This time can be as short as 30 seconds or 1 minute. It may take a while to return to the level of activity you were normally able to do before you became sick.

### Examples of Fitness Exercises



#### 7. Marching on the spot

- If needed, hold onto a stable chair or surface for support, and have a chair nearby to rest
- Lift your knees one at a time

##### Progressing this exercise:

- Increase the height you lift your legs, aiming to reach hip height if possible

##### When you might choose this exercise:

- If you cannot go outside to walk
- If you are not able to walk very far before needing to sit down



#### 8. Step-ups

- Use the bottom step of your flight of stairs
- If needed, hold on to the handrail for support, and have a chair nearby to rest
- Step up and down, changing the leg you start with every 10 steps

##### Progressing this exercise:

- Increase the height of the step, or speed of stepping up and down
- If your balance is good enough to do this exercise without holding on, then you can carry weights as you step up and down

##### When you might choose this exercise:

- If you cannot go outside
- If you are not able to walk very far before needing to sit down

Monitor your breathing to decide the right level of exercise for you. You can start with 1 minute of marching in place holding onto the countertop or walking for 10-15 minutes.

### 9. Walking

- Use a walking frame, crutches, or stick if needed
- Choose a route that is relatively flat

#### Progressing this exercise:

- Increasing the speed or distance you walk, or if accessible, include walking uphill in your route

#### When you might choose this exercise:

- If you can get outdoors to exercise

### 10. Jogging or cycling

- Only do jogging or cycling if it is medically safe for you

#### When you might choose this exercise:

- If walking is not making you out of breath enough
- If you could jog or cycle before you became unwell

If you are still struggling with an exercise plan after a few weeks, ask your primary care provider for an *Outpatient Physical Therapy Referral*.

## MANAGING CHALLENGES: ATTENTION, MEMORY AND THINKING CLEARLY

You may notice that you are having some trouble with your attention, memory, and thinking after COVID-19. Ask your family and friends if they notice that you are having any new problems in these areas. These problems can have an impact on your daily activities, work, and school. If you are having these problems, you may notice they become worse when you are tired. Try these tips:

- **Physical exercise** helps your brain recovery. Look at the sections above for exercise and breathing tips.
- **Brain exercises** may help. Try new hobbies or activities, puzzles, word and number games, memory exercises, and reading. Start with brain exercises that you can do, but that challenge you. Increase the challenge as you are able. It is important to keep you motivated.
- **Remind yourself** about the things you need to do with lists and alerts. You can use a phone alarm to help.

- **Break down activities** into small steps to avoid feeling overwhelmed. These steps may help you manage your everyday tasks.

If you are still having problems after a few weeks, ask your primary care provider for an *Outpatient Speech-Language Pathology Referral*.

## **MANAGING THE FATIGUE AND EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES**

Becoming active again as you recover is important. Sometimes it can be hard if you are feeling very tired, breathless, or weak. These feelings are normal after having COVID-19. Here are some tips:

- **3 P's: Pace, Prioritize, and Plan**
- **Adjust your expectations.** Decide what you want to do each day. Set realistic goals based on how you feel.
- **Save your energy.** Complete a task while sitting or break it down into steps.
- **Pace yourself.** Take breaks, space out harder tasks, and leave time to rest.
- **Let others help.** If a task is too hard or if you are exhausted, ask for help. An example is getting help with grocery shopping.
- **Ease back into activities.** Remember that physical work or thinking (cognitive) work can cause you to become exhausted.

If you are still having problems after a few weeks, ask your primary care provider for an *Outpatient Occupational Therapy Referral*.

## **FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT**

**You are not alone.** Reach out and ask for help. Your primary care provider can refer you to resources to help with your recovery.

### **CONFIDENTIAL COVID-19 RECOVERY SUPPORT GROUP**

**[COVID19RecoverySupport@UVMHealth.org](mailto:COVID19RecoverySupport@UVMHealth.org)**

The University of Vermont Health Network offers a free, confidential online support group for all patients, family members, caregivers, community members and providers who have experienced long-lasting symptoms. Meetings are held online via ZOOM on the third Wednesday of each month from 5-6:30 pm and are led by UVM Medical Center physicians. To register or for more information, please email: [COVID19RecoverySupport@UVMHealth.org](mailto:COVID19RecoverySupport@UVMHealth.org)