

# LONG COVID BREATHLESSNESS

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### KEY POINTS

- Breathlessness, difficulty breathing, and coughing are all symptoms associated with Long Covid, and can interact with other Long Covid symptoms.
- Common breathing problems in Long Covid include: breathing pattern disorder, physical damage to the lungs and airways, excessive mucus, and throat sensitivity.
- Long Covid can also mean that less of the oxygen you do breathe in will actually reach the rest of your body, meaning that you need to take in more oxygen to compensate.
- There are techniques and support available to help you manage your symptoms.

**This factsheet is only about breathlessness caused by Long Covid. For information on managing breathlessness in general, see the Essential Guide on “Breathlessness”.**

# Long Covid and breathlessness

Covid-19 is a virus that affects many processes in the body, including breathing. This difficulty breathing can last long after the infection itself has passed. Around one in four people experience breathing difficulties that cause them ongoing problems. These can include:

- Persistent coughing or wheezing.
- Chest pain, tightness, or a “burning” feeling in the chest.
- A feeling of pressure in your chest.
- Finding it difficult to get enough air when talking, exercising, or exerting yourself.
- Too much mucus in the throat or lungs, which has to be cleared through coughing or clearing your throat.
- Difficulty breathing through your nose - this can lead to snoring and breathing through your mouth.
- Dysautonomia (problems with your autonomic nervous system) such as PoTS, which can make breathing difficult.

These symptoms can come and go, or they can be consistent over time. Many people with Long Covid also find that they are more vulnerable to other chest infections.

For advice on managing the impact of breathing symptoms, see the Essential Guide on **Breathlessness**.

## Oxygen perfusion

The term “**oxygen perfusion**” is less complicated than it sounds. It means the way that oxygen moves in and out of your blood, supplying muscles and organs throughout your body.

Oxygen perfusion may be affected by Long Covid. This means that less of the oxygen you breathe in will reach the rest of your body. So, you need to take in more oxygen to reach the level of oxygen perfusion your body needs. This can lead to heavy breathing (**hyperventilation**) and a sense of breathlessness.

It can also contribute to pain and muscle aches, as parts of your body may go into **anaerobic respiration** (the low-oxygen process that is usually used when you are exercising heavily or unable to breathe normally), which leads to muscle stiffness.

## Breathing pattern disorder

Breathing pattern disorder is a condition where you are not breathing in the most efficient way for your body. It is common among people with Long Covid. Breathing pattern disorder can mean:

- You are often more aware of your breathing, or feel that your breathing is no longer automatic (you have to think about it to keep your breathing steady).
- You feel unable to get enough air or take deep enough breaths.
- You get out of breath more quickly, or in response to less exertion, than you used to.
- You frequently hyperventilate, and may experience symptoms of hyperventilation, such as dizziness, blurred vision, heart palpitations, or anxiety.
- You sigh, yawn, or breathe through your mouth more often than you used to.
- You often feel pressure or pain in your chest, especially in your diaphragm or chest wall (the pain feels like it is in your ribs, not deeper).
- You may have other symptoms unrelated to breathing such as: bloating, headaches, or muscle tension in your neck and shoulders.

Breathing pattern disorder can be managed with physiotherapy.

## Physical damage to the lungs

Covid infection can cause damage to your internal organs, including your lungs and airways.

Some people experience a kind of lung damage called **pneumonitis**. This is swelling inside your lungs, which shows up as small areas of cloudiness in an X-ray or CT scan. Pneumonitis makes your lungs less effective, but almost always improves within a few months of recovering from the initial Covid infection.

People who had severe Covid may also develop **pulmonary fibrosis**. This is scarring of the lungs, which can occur after infection or inflammation, making the air “rasp” against the delicate parts of your lungs. It can also be caused or worsened by intubation if you were put on a ventilator in hospital. Fibrosis lasts longer than pneumonitis. It cannot be reversed, but by managing your symptoms and being careful with your breathing, you can prevent it from getting worse.

You may also experience temporary or long-term damage to your **diaphragm**. The diaphragm is the muscle at the base of the ribs, which controls your breathing. You may experience pain, weakness, or even spasms in this muscle, which affect your ability to breathe. A similar thing can happen to the muscles and cartilage of your **ribcage**.

## Sore throats and voice changes

Around one in three people experience a sore, dry, or itchy throat as part of their Long Covid symptoms. This can mean that you:

- Are more sensitive to dust, dry air, and other things that can irritate your throat.
- Feel like there is a lump in your throat, or like you have difficulty swallowing.
- Often have a sore throat or a tickle in your throat, especially first thing in the morning.
- Have too much mucus in your throat, or have to clear your throat a lot.

Changes to your throat can also lead to changes in your voice. You may find that your voice is croaky, hoarse, or quieter than it used to be, particularly when your symptoms are worse.

Drink plenty of water, speak softly to avoid straining your throat, and reduce caffeine intake if you can. A speech and language therapist (SLT) may be able to give you advice on managing not only voice changes, but also persistent sore throat or mucus issues.

## Breathlessness and other Long Covid symptoms

Breathlessness can interact with other Long Covid symptoms, particularly fatigue and post-exertional malaise, to make it even more difficult to manage day-to-day activities. Breathlessness can also make other symptoms worse, particularly things like dizziness, brain fog, and chest pains. For more on other Long Covid symptoms, see our factsheets on: **Long Covid Fatigue, PoTS**, and **Brain Fog**, as well as our Essential Guide on **Chronic Pain**.

## Will it get better?

Since Long Covid has only been recognised as a condition for a short time, there is limited data on its long-term effects. The current evidence suggests that, while many people will continue to have underlying breathing problems, the symptoms of breathlessness and breathing issues can be managed and improved over time.

To support your recovery, you may be able to get help from:

- Physiotherapists.
- Occupational therapists.
- Speech and language therapists.
- Your GP or other primary care provider.

To find out more about managing breathlessness, see the **Breathlessness** Essential Guide. CHSS can also offer support and advice on managing breathlessness - for individual support and advice, call our Advice Line on **0808 801 0899**.

# Resources

## Breathlessness resources

### Asthma + Lung UK

Web: [www.asthmaandlung.org.uk](http://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk)

Tel: **0300 222 5800**

Email: [helpline@asthmaandlung.org.uk](mailto:helpline@asthmaandlung.org.uk)

A major UK-wide charity for breathing and respiratory problems, including those associated with Long Covid..

### Royal College of SLTs

Web: [www.rcslt.org/news/new-long-Covid-guidance-and-patient-handbook/](http://www.rcslt.org/news/new-long-Covid-guidance-and-patient-handbook/)

Specialist information for people dealing with Long Covid symptoms, from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

### NHS Inform

Web: [www.nhsinform.scot/long-term-effects-of-Covid-19-long-Covid/signs-and-symptoms/long-Covid-breathlessness/](http://www.nhsinform.scot/long-term-effects-of-Covid-19-long-Covid/signs-and-symptoms/long-Covid-breathlessness/)

The NHS Scotland information website's page on Long Covid breathlessness. They also have one on cough.

### Physiotherapy for BPD

Web: [www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk](http://www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk)

Specialist support and information on Breathing Pattern Disorder and how to manage it, including exercises you can do at home.

## Long Covid resources

### LongCovid.scot

Web: [www.longCovid.scot/support](http://www.longCovid.scot/support)

A central hub of organisations and charities which can provide help and information on Long Covid.

### National Wellbeing Hub

Web: [wellbeinghub.scot/resource/tips-for-managing-long-Covid/](http://wellbeinghub.scot/resource/tips-for-managing-long-Covid/)

A central hub for self-management of Long Covid symptoms.

All of Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland's booklets and factsheets can be found online or ordered in print at [www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub)

This includes the following relevant documents:

**Breathlessness Essential Guide**

**Long Covid Essential Guide**

**Life with Long Covid Essential Guide**

You can also get personal support, information, and advice by calling our Advice Line on **0808 801 0899** or texting **ADVICE** to **66777**.

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You can also go to our website for information, advice and support: **[www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)**

Find a range of easy-to-read booklets and factsheets at our resources hub:

**[www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub)**



Scan here to see all our resources!

### Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

2nd Floor, Hobart House  
80 Hanover Street  
Edinburgh EH2 1EL  
Tel: 0131 225 6963

Scottish Charity Number: SC018761  
Limited company number: SC129114

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Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland

