



Long Covid Breathlessness

Breathlessness following COVID

- Breathlessness, or feeling out of breath, is a normal response to exertion.
- However, even after your initial COVID infection passes, you may find that you feel breathless more often than usual.
- Breathlessness is one of the most common Long Covid symptoms. 36% of people with Long Covid have shortness of breath.
- Many people find that their breathing improves with time.

What causes breathlessness?

- Some respiratory health conditions, such as Covid, may cause breathlessness.
- Anxiety can also contribute to breathlessness. If you feel anxious you may begin to breathe faster, which makes your breathing muscles tired and so you breathe even faster. This can result in breathlessness and panic.
- If you have spent more time in bed due to fatigue or during a hospital admission, this can lead to your muscles becoming weaker.
- When you start to get moving again and performing activities such as getting out of bed and walking, you may feel breathless as the weak muscles need to rebuild their strength again.

Important!

If you are short of breath, talk to your doctor.

Breathlessness can be caused by a lot of things. Even within Long Covid, some causes of breathlessness are more treatable than others.

It is important to know what is causing your breathlessness.





How does breathlessness feel?

What does breathlessness feel like?

Everyone experiences breathlessness differently, so it is useful to recognise how it feels for you.

When you are breathless, you may find that:

- Your chest feels tight
- You breathe faster and shallower
- 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

This may come on suddenly, or slowly get worse over time.

What could make you feel breathless?

Many day-to-day tasks can be impacted and make you feel breathless, such as:

- Getting out of bed
- Walking
- Getting washed
- Getting dressed
- Climbing stairs
- Eating
- Housework



Managing breathlessness

Managing breathlessness

Living with breathlessness can be difficult, but the good news is that there are lots of things you can do to help manage it. These include:

- Using breathing techniques
- Adopting “positions of ease”
- Learning how to pace yourself
- Living a healthy lifestyle

You should discuss with your doctor if medication is needed, or if a treatment such as pulmonary rehabilitation might help.

Breathing exercises



Breathing exercises

There are several different breathing techniques which you can try to help relieve your breathlessness, these include:

- Breathing control
- Pursed-lip breathing
- Square breathing
- Blow as you go

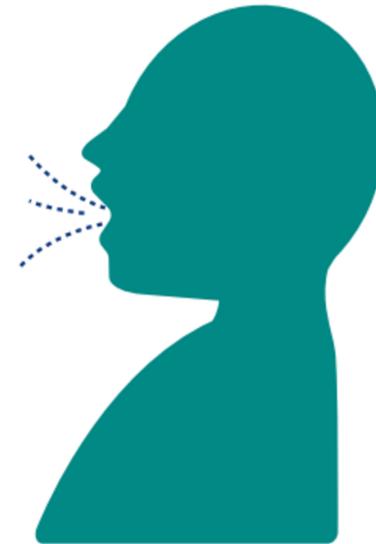
You can ask your physiotherapist, nurse or doctor about which may be best for you.

Breathing control

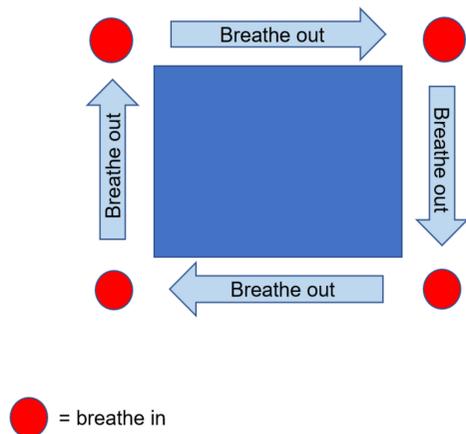
- Take relaxed, calm, deep breaths at a comfortable speed.
- Breathe in gently through your nose, then out through your mouth.
- Listen to your breathing, concentrate by placing your hand on your stomach to feel your breath.
- You could practice breathing control while in a comfortable position watching TV or listening to music.

Pursed-lip breathing

- Breathe in through your nose then slowly out through your mouth with your lips pursed, as if you were whistling.
- This helps to slow your breathing down.



Square breathing



Square breathing can help to settle your breathing.

- Use the picture of the square provided, or you can look at a square object.
- Follow the edges of the square slowly with your eyes.
- At each corner of the square take a breath in.
- As you breathe out, follow the side of the square with your eyes until the next corner.
- Gradually try and slow your breathing as you repeat the full square.

Blow as you go

When you are doing an activity that requires a lot of effort, it helps to coordinate your breathing with the task, or “blow as you go”.

- Breathe in first before you do the activity and breathe out when doing the activity.
- For example when standing up, first take a breath in and then breathe out as you stand up from your chair.
- If the activity is continuous, breathe in and out in time with the activity. For example, when walking up stairs, breathe in on one step and breathe out on the next step.



Positions of ease

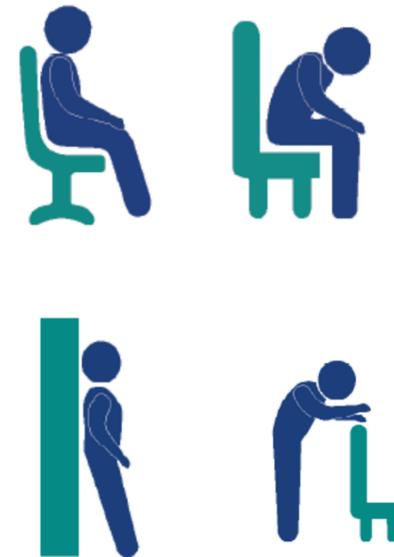


Positions of ease

The following standing or sitting positions can help your breathing recover and help you to breathe more easily.

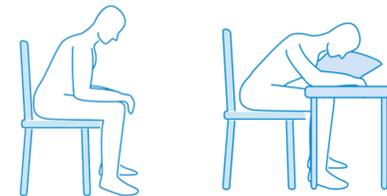
It is important to try and relax.

Some positions may work better for you than others depending on where you are, what you have been doing and what makes you feel comfortable.



Positions of ease (2)

1. In a seated position, lean forwards with your forearms resting on your knees or a table. Keep your arms and shoulders as relaxed as possible.



2. Leaning forwards whilst standing up, rest your elbows on a stable surface such as a kitchen counter, windowsill or high backed chair.

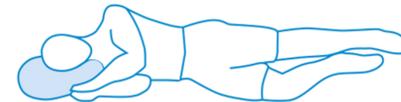


Positions of ease (3)

3. Lean backwards or sideways against a wall with your feet slightly apart and a short distance away from the wall. Let your arms hang relaxed by your sides.



4. Lie on your side in bed and place a few pillows under your head and neck to make sure your head and shoulders are raised and supported.



Pulmonary rehabilitation



Pulmonary 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

If you think it may help, you can discuss a PR referral with your health professional.

Pacing and lifestyle



Pacing yourself

- One of the most important ways to help your breathlessness is to pace yourself.
- Make sure you take rests when you need to.
- Try not to do too much in one go.
- This can also help if your Long Covid makes you fatigued.

Lifestyle

There may be some lifestyle changes that can help to manage your breathlessness.

For example:

- If you smoke, quitting will make breathing easier in general.
- Eating well and drinking sensibly can reduce the risk of getting chest infections which may worsen your breathlessness.
- Careful exercise can help to build your strength and improve your breathing. However, avoid overdoing it!
- Reducing stress and anxiety where possible can reduce breathlessness.

Some additional tips

- When you are breathless, try not to speak until it settles.
- Pace yourself, break up activities with regular rests if required.
- Try sleeping in an upright position using pillows to support you.
- Pillows can also help make you feel more comfortable when adopting any of the 'positions of ease'.
- Keep a fan by your bed or chair and turn it on when you feel breathless.



Further information & support

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Information and Support

Advice Line Nurse Services: a free, confidential service providing nursing support and information. Available Monday to Friday 9.30am-4pm.

Telephone: 0808 8010899

Email: adviceline@chss.org.uk

Text: NURSE to 66777

Health Information Services have a range of up to date stroke publications and information leaflets, including work & financial support resources.

www.chss.org.uk

Information used to create this resource

Information has been taken with kind permission from:

The CHSS booklet **“Long Covid Breathlessness”**

Find this and other CHSS resources online at www.chss.org.uk

If you have any comments or feedback about the contents of these slides, please contact CHSS directly:

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