



Physical Activity and Long Covid

Introduction

- Long Covid can make it harder to perform everyday activities and tasks
- You may have trouble returning to your usual activities
- This can be caused by physical and mental symptoms including:
 - Fatigue and brain fog
 - Coordination issues
 - Breathlessness
 - Pain or muscle weakness
 - Heart complications
 - Mobility and balance

The importance of physical activity

- Careful, measured physical activity can improve your mood and overall fitness.
- However, too much physical activity with Long Covid can **make symptoms worse**.
- It is important to take care in planning your activity and stop before you experience pain, discomfort, or severe fatigue.
- One of the best things you can do for your recovery is learning to balance your physical activity at a healthy level.



What is physical activity?

What do we mean by physical activity?

- Physical activity is any movement of your body that uses energy.
- It can be as simple as standing, gardening and shopping or exercise like swimming, playing tennis and jogging.
- The level of physical activity that you can do will depend on who you are and what your symptoms are.
- Long Covid can lower your tolerance for physical activity. Breathlessness, fatigue, and pain can all make physical activity more challenging.

Light Physical Activity

- **Light activity** has only a small effect on your breathing, heart rate, and fatigue.
- While doing **light** physical activity, you should not notice any change in your ability to talk or hold a conversation.
- Examples of light activity for a healthy person might include:
 - Getting up to make a cup of tea
 - Walking short distances without hurrying
 - Dusting the house or pruning the garden

Moderate Physical Activity

- **Moderate intensity activity** raises your heart rate, makes you feel warmer, and makes you breathe faster.
- While doing **moderate** physical activity, you should be able to talk, but may find it hard to talk for a long time or control your breathing.
- Examples of moderate activity for a healthy person might include:
 - Walking a long way
 - Cycling, running, or swimming
 - Vacuuming or mowing the lawn

Vigorous Physical Activity

- **Vigorous activity** increases your heart rate, makes it difficult to breathe, and makes you hot and sweaty.
- While doing **vigorous** physical activity, you will probably struggle to speak more than a few words at a time.
- Most **moderately intense** activities will become **vigorous** if you do them for a long time or to a high level of effort.

If you live with fatigue or breathlessness, it is best to **avoid vigorous activity**.



How much and how often?

How much physical activity?

- It is important that you **do not do more physical activity than is comfortable**.
- There are no hard and fast rules for how much activity is appropriate. You will have to find out what works for you.
- You might find it helpful to talk to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist for advice if one is available.
- It can take a long time to find the correct balance.
- What is best for you can change over time.

How often should I be physically active?

- It is best to find a routine where possible
- Regular and often physical activity, is better than exercising a lot but infrequently.
- If you can, try to **move a little every day**.
- If there are days when you cannot be active, that's okay too.

If possible, reduce the **amount** of activity, rather than **how often** you are active.



How Long Covid affects physical activity

Exercise tolerance

- **Exercise tolerance** means how much physical activity or exercise you can safely do.

This is affected by Long Covid in many ways:

- You may get out of breath faster when exercising.
- You may be more prone to stiffness and aching when you are active.
- Pain or reduced flexibility may make exercise more difficult.
- If you have spent a lot of time in bed, either while you had acute COVID or as a result of fatigue, you may experience **deconditioning**, where your muscles are weaker from disuse.

Post-exertional malaise

- Post-exertional malaise is a common pattern where fatigue and other Long Covid symptoms get worse after a physical or mental strain.
- You may find that after too much exercise, you experience:
 - Extreme fatigue or tiredness
 - Pain or other uncomfortable sensations, like itching or twitching
 - Increased breathlessness
 - Lower immunity and a higher risk of disease
- Although the mechanism is not fully understood, post-exertional malaise is a **physical medical condition** rather than a mental health one.

Motivation & planning



What matters to you

- Think about why you want to be more active. This might be:
 - Feeling fitter and healthier, having more energy, getting back to something you enjoy or just feeling more like your old self.
 - Spend more time with family and socialising with friends.
 - Being more independent.
 - Returning to your hobbies
- Whatever you choose to do, **choose activities you enjoy**. These will be more satisfying, and easier to motivate yourself to do.

Goal setting

- Goal setting allows you to think about what you want to achieve in the short, medium and long term.
- Goals give you something to work towards.
- This can help motivate you.
- The things that matter to you most can be goals to aim for in your recovery.
- **Don't try to rush** your progress. Set realistic goals, break big goals down into smaller steps, and listen to your body.

Remember: you can always change your plan.

Planning and routine

- The best tool for safe activity with Long Covid is **planning**.
- Pace your activities throughout the day.
- This includes social or mental activities - like reading, working, or having visitors.
- Give yourself regular rest periods.
- Keep to daily routines. This makes planning and managing time easier.
- Give yourself more recovery time than you think you will need.
- Celebrate achievements, even if they are only small.

Finding your baseline (1)

- Your **baseline** for physical activity is the amount of physical activity you could do consistently for five out of seven days without your symptoms getting worse.
- Try to avoid going above this baseline.
- If you can consistently maintain a routine for **over a month**, then you can start to **slowly** increase the amount or intensity.
- If you find you are consistently struggling with your symptoms, you may need to lower your baseline.

Finding your baseline (2)

- It can help to keep an activity diary for a few weeks to figure out what triggers your symptoms.
- Ideally, start at **half** of what you think you can do.
- If you can do this amount for over a week without your symptoms getting worse, start to increase the amount.
- Increase the amount by no more than 20% at a time, and do not increase your baseline more than once in a two-week period.
- Remember that it's okay to do less!



Activities you could try

Exercise

- Some exercise is more suitable for people with Long Covid than others.
- It's best to try light or moderate-intensity exercise that you can do at your own pace.
- For example, you might try:
 - Yoga
 - Pilates
 - Gentle walking
 - Qi Gong
 - Swimming or Aquarobics
 - Light weight training
- It is usually easier to do exercise you enjoy.

Walking

- Walking is a good exercise for many people with Long Covid, as you can walk as far as you feel comfortable and rest when you need to.
- Walking outside can also give you fresh air and sunlight, which improve mental health and reduce fatigue.
- You could walk alone, with friends, or in a local walking group.
- If you walk alone, make sure that you tell someone where you plan to go.
- Take your phone with you.
- Some people find it easier to walk regularly if they can listen to a podcast or music as they go.

Yoga, Pilates and Qi Gong

- There are a variety of gentle, stretching exercises that can be a good way to exercise at your own rate and increase your flexibility.
- Many people find yoga, Pilates, Qi Gong and Tai Chi helpful.
- You may be able to find classes online, or local in-person groups (although these may be affected by COVID restrictions).
- YouTube has many videos which can show you individual moves or give you options to follow along. Be aware that not all videos are equal and **stop** if you feel pain or discomfort.

Warm water exercise

- Exercising in warm water – e.g. pool swimming or Aqua aerobics – can reduce joint pain as well as building strength and flexibility.
- Bear in mind that breathlessness may make swimming more difficult.
- Many leisure centres with swimming pools offer exercise classes for people with health conditions.
- Swimming pools may be affected by COVID regulations.

Weight training

- Using **light** weights and gentle weight exercise may help to build strength.
- However, this can be more likely than the other exercises mentioned to trigger fatigue and pain.
- If you feel any discomfort, or if you regularly struggle with fatigue after weight training, **stop**.
- **Only** take up weight training with professional supervision. This might be in a gym, or under the instruction of a physiotherapist.

Building physical activity into your daily life

- There are many ways to build physical activity into your daily life.
- Remember that any movement counts as physical activity!
- For example, you may be active through some of the following:
 - Gardening or housework
 - Shopping or cooking
 - Walking up and down stairs
 - Playing with your children

Remember: all of this needs to be considered when you calculate your baseline.

Precautions with physical activity

- When exercising, it is normal to feel warm and for your heart rate to increase.
- However, **stop exercising if you experience any of:**
 - Dizziness, sickness or nausea
 - A pounding heart
 - Excessive sweating
 - Excessive shortness of breath
 - Chest pain (if you experience new chest pain, **consult a doctor**)

These often mean you have done too much. Scale back your level of activity accordingly.

Things to remember

- Gently increasing your activity levels can help your recovery, but it is important to do this **slowly and gradually**.
- Take your time, and **set small targets** to work towards.
- Only do activities and exercises you are comfortable doing.
- Listen to your body and take plenty of rests. Your energy levels can change day-to-day, or even hour-to-hour.
- Everyone recovers at a different pace.



Support available in Lothian

Lothian support – thistle foundation

The **Thistle Foundation** offers individual support, including:

- Long Covid Support (online and telephone support)
- Self-management support (wellbeing coaching, lifestyle management and mindfulness)
- Support with the impact of loneliness and isolation

Email **referrals@thistle.org.uk** with your name and contact details and they will get in touch with you.



Lothian support – Edinburgh Leisure

Edinburgh Leisure have a range of programmes to support people in Edinburgh City to get active in the community.

If you feel you would benefit from one of these programmes, talk to your GP or other healthcare professional who can make a referral on your behalf.

Find out more:

- www.edinburghleisure.co.uk/activecommunities
- Call: **0131 458 2260**
- Email: **active@edinburghleisure.co.uk**



Lothian support – Thrive Edinburgh

The **Thrive Edinburgh** programme offers local activities in community green spaces, including:

- Walking and jogging groups
- Conservation activities
- Woodland programmes.

Find out more or self-refer:

www.elgt.org.uk/projects/better-health-wellbeing/thrive-physical-activity-and-greenspaces/



Support available



People who can help

You may be able to get support with your physical activity from:

- Family and friends
- Your GP
- Support groups
- Local activity groups



Further information & advice available from:

- **CHSS Advice Line Services:** A confidential, free advice and support service. Open Monday-Friday, 9:30am-4:00pm.
 - Email: advice@chss.org.uk
 - Tel: **0808 801 0899**
 - Text: **NURSE to 66777**
 - Website: www.chss.org.uk
- **CHSS** also run Virtual Physical Activity sessions.
www.chss.org.uk/peersupport/physical-activity-self-referral/
- **NHS Inform** has self management information for people with symptoms of Long Covid:
www.nhsinform.scot/long-term-effects-of-covid-19-long-covid

Sources used to create this resource

Information used to create this resource has been taken with kind permission from:

- CHSS Publications:
 - www.chss.org.uk/chss-publications-dvds-and-resources
- Other websites are also referred to/ signposted in this resource:
 - www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/your-wellbeing/getting-moving-again/
 - www.nhsinform.scot/longer-term-effects-of-covid-19-long-covid/

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The following organisations contributed to this presentation

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