

# Getting better after illness

Delivered by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board



**recovery**  
*from COVID-19*



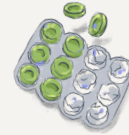
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# Getting better after illness guides



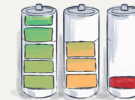
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Breathlessness & Coughing



Poor concentration & Brain fog



Tiredness & Fatigue



Food & Nutrition



Pain management



Sleep & Rest



Worry, low mood & anxiety

Getting better after illness:

# Breathlessness & Coughing

Breathlessness is a natural response to exercise or strenuous activities like walking up a hill. Research has shown that *following an illness, such as COVID-19, it is very common to be short of breath whilst doing 'normal activities',* (things like getting dressed or walking down stairs.)

There are a few factors that could explain persistent breathlessness such as increased stress, infection, or reduced activity levels. This alongside allergies or other infections can produce a cough.

Feeling short of breath can be worrying and stressful. Remember, there are simple tips that could help you on the following page.

**Some people find that by slowly returning to their usual activities their breathlessness starts to decrease and this is because the more they do the easier the activities become.** With time recovery is possible and symptoms should start to disappear.







# Coughing

**In some cases a cough can continue after illness.** Many of us had a persistent cough during COVID-19. In some cases this cough remains.

The main thing to remember; **it may take time for your symptoms to disappear.**

Here are few things you can do to help:

## Keep your chest clear

If you have a productive cough, **keeping your chest clear** is important as it reduces the chance of getting a chest infection. This can be achieved by taking prescribed medication regularly and keeping active.

## Active cycle of breathing

Additionally, the 'active cycle of breathing' technique can help keep your chest clear.

[Learn more](#)



## Drink water

Keeping hydrated can help reduce your cough symptoms and soothe your throat. Try a sip of water when you feel a cough coming on.



# Breathlessness

Breathlessness can have a big impact on your life and can be very worrying. It is important to try not to panic.

**Anxiety or fear** can increase how breathless you feel.

**Here are few things you can do to help:**

## Breathing control steps

As we get more anxious, we may become aware of our breathing, breathe faster and tense our breathing muscles. Learning to stay calm when we are breathless can help us feel in control. To help control your breathing you can try a few simple steps which help you become more aware of your breathing.



### Breathing Control Steps

from the Association of Chartered  
Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care



## Change positions

Changing positions can also help reduce your cough and help with breathlessness. Rather than laying on your back, try laying on your side or sitting up.

## Become more active

Your breathlessness should improve as you slowly increase your activities and exercise. It is important to become active again when you are recovering, but this can be hard if you feel very tired, breathless, and weak, which is normal after being unwell.

It is important to pace ourselves in order to maintain an even level of activity throughout the day instead of doing as much as possible in the morning and then resting all afternoon.

[More information on energy conservation](#)



If you are struggling to plan your activities, you can use the following activity planner to help you:



### Activity Planner

from the Chartered Society  
of Physiotherapy (CSP)



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Getting better after illness:

# Poor concentration and brain-fog

This might mean that for periods of time, you struggle to concentrate on something, you might become very tired when you try to concentrate, have short-term memory difficulties or feel that you can't think clearly or struggle to understand information.

Many people experience occasional problems with a lack of concentration after illness. **Remember, brain fog after illness is common and usually resolves with time.** It's natural to feel distracted after an illness, worry, pain, stress, poor sleep or medications can contribute to this.

It becomes harder when this is more prolonged or irregular; periods when we are fine and then other times when we feel our brains are just not working properly. Remember, symptoms usually resolve over time.

**There are some tips that could help you manage 'Brain Fog' on the next page.**



# Lifestyle changes

Make sure you are covered on the basics - get lots of rest and sleep, eat and drink water regularly, do some gentle exercise and try to relax

## Get enough sleep

See our sleep advice section for our sleep and fatigue tips:



### Sleep and Rest

Top tips on sleep and rest for getting better after an illness



## Review your diet

Try to eat regularly and have a **balanced diet**, this should include lots of fruit and veg. **Regular water** is important for brain health but avoid alcohol.

**See our food and diet section for more.**



### Food & Nutrition

Top tips on food and nutrition for getting better after an illness



## Short bursts & breaks

**Do activities in short bursts** - lots of people find that 5-8 minutes is the maximum that they can manage.

### Take breaks between activities

## Take exercise

This doesn't have to be going to the gym or going for a run. Simply going for a walk or standing to do the washing up counts as exercise.

## Manage your stress

Do positive things to look after yourself. This could include mindfulness, speaking with friends, yoga or an online art course. Even if it's a long soak in the bath, **it's important to do the things you enjoy.**





# Exercise your Brain

It is important to keep your mind active during periods of brain fog and poor concentration.

## Here is what you can do:

### Avoid too much TV

Avoid too much TV or electronic activities- this tends to exacerbate the concentration issues.

**No more than 1 hour at a time** with at least a few hours break is recommended.

### Be organised

Try to be organised and use a diary / memory prompts / post-it notes / phone alarms.  
This should help with memory issues.



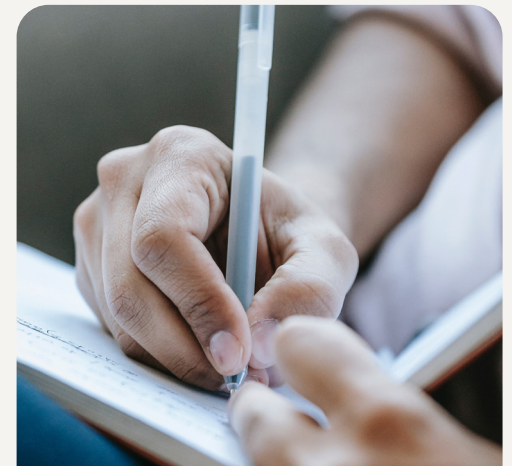
### One thing at a time

Try not to do more than 1 thing at a time you may have been a great multi-tasker in the past but doing 2 or more tasks at once is likely to increase brain fog.

### 'Lifting the fog'

Use the 'Lifting the Fog' useful practical tips

[Lifting the Fog: Treating Cognitive Problems](#)



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Getting better after illness:

# Tiredness & Fatigue

When you are ill or recovering from an illness, you are likely to have less energy and feel tired. A simple task, such as putting on your shoes, can feel like hard work.

**The Royal College of Occupational Therapists** have produced a great guide to help you pace, plan and prioritise.

## Pace yourself

Pacing yourself will help you have enough energy to complete an activity. You'll recover faster if you work on a task until you are tired rather than exhausted.

**The pacing approach:** Climb five steps, rest for 30 seconds and repeat. You won't need a long rest at the top and won't feel so tired the next day.

**The big push approach:** Climb all the stairs at once. You'll have to rest for 10 minutes at the top, and feel achy and tired the next day.





## Plan

Look at the activities you normally do on a daily and weekly basis, and develop a plan for how you can spread these activities out.

If certain activities make you breathless or fatigued, rather than do them in one go, **plan ahead to do them throughout the day.**

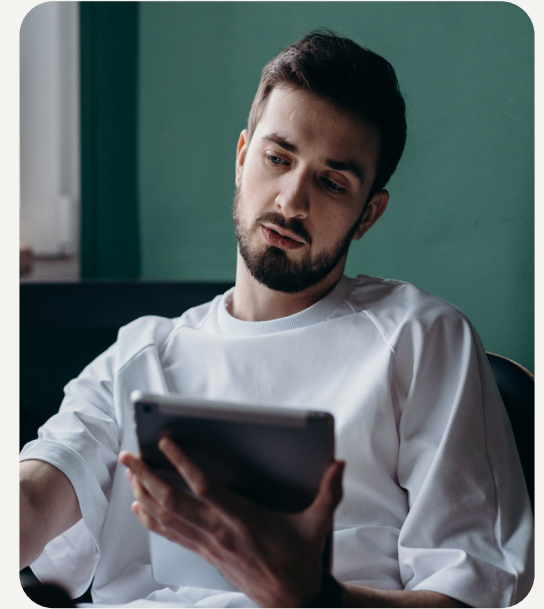
Do weekly activities such as gardening, laundry and food shopping on different days, with **rest days in between.**

## Prioritise

Some daily activities are necessary, but are all of yours?

Ask yourself the following questions to find out which of yours are necessary:

- **What do I need to do today?**
- **What do I want to do today?**
- **What can be put off until another day?**
- **What can I ask someone else to do for me?**



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Getting better after illness:

# Food & Nutrition

Following illness, changes in weight and appetite are common and can result in weight loss or weight gain.

This can be for many reasons:

- Poor appetite
- Tiredness and weakness
- Reduced activity levels
- Eating high energy “comfort” foods (i.e: chocolates and crisps)

It is important to remember that everyone experiences fluctuations in weight and that this is normal especially following illness, this can be worrying. Eating and drinking well is important as **it provides the body with hydration, energy, and nutrients that help with recovery.**

Remember, keeping active, eating nutritious meals and having regular mealtimes can help you body recover quicker.



# Food & nutrition tips

**It is normal to have lost weight as a result of illness.** You may notice that your clothes feel looser on your skin or that you're not eating the same amount you used to.

**Eating and drinking more is crucial to help recovery** and support the body to fight disease.

**Here are few things you can do to help:**

## Eating

Try eating **little and often**: many people find that trying smaller meals and snacks inbetween, instead of three large meals, may feel more manageable.

- Always try to **sit up whilst eating** and drinking.
- You might also want to try choosing **softer or easier to chew foods** at this time.
- If you have a low appetite try snacks that have **high calories and protein**.

High calorie & protein snack examples



## When you don't feel up to eating

**Nourishing drinks** can be helpful if you aren't feeling up to eating. These help supply the energy you need during recovery and provides good hydration which is essential on your recovery journey.

**Try 1 pint blue top milk, which you can add flavouring to, and/or nutrition supplement drinks.**

## Staying hydrated

**It is also important to drink enough.**

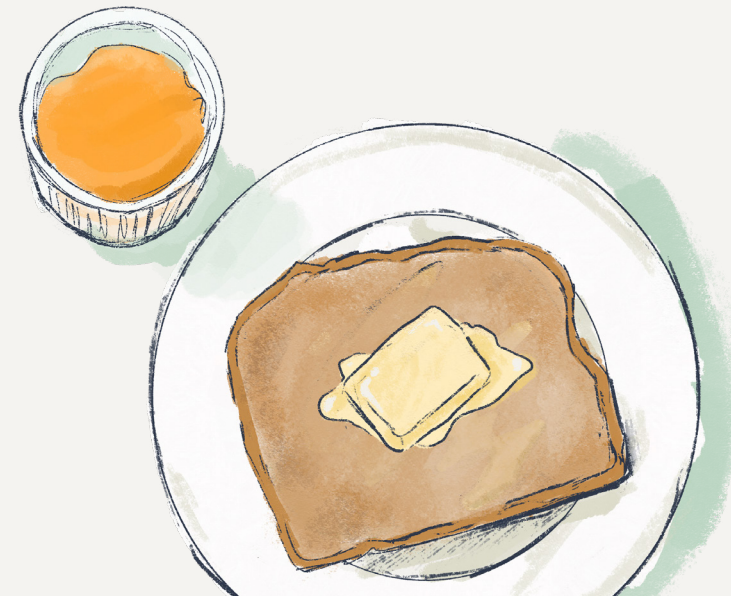
Staying hydrated helps with recovery, and the feeling of physical strength. **Avoiding alcohol** during recovery is important as alcohol use (especially heavy intake) has a wide ranging effect on our bodies.

When your body is fighting infection it needs more energy and often needs more fluids.

## Ask for help

Ask your **friends or family** to prepare your meals for you so that you don't get too tired.

**You may be able to get food delivered to your home.** There are a number of companies that deliver nutritionally balanced meals either fresh or frozen. This can also help when you are tired and struggling to cope with food preparation.



## Changes with taste or smell

You may find your favourite foods taste and smell differently following illness.

This may mean that food may taste bland, salty, sweet or metallic. However, these changes are usually **short-term** but can affect your appetite and how much you eat.

Here are few things you can do to help:

### Food choices

You can try to improve the taste of food by **choosing foods that appeal to you** to ensure you eat well.

You should also remember to **continue to retry foods** as your taste preferences are likely to change and return to normal as you recover further.

More information on loss of taste and smell after COVID-19



## Weight gain worries

Everyone experiences fluctuations in weight and gaining weight is a normal process, especially after long periods of illness.

Here are few things you can do to aid weight-loss:

### Eating habits

**Reducing portion sizes** and having a **balanced diet** will aid with weight loss. If you find you are always hungry try and stick to a **regular meal pattern**, this can help regulate your levels of hunger.

If you feel like you're hungry and you are looking for a snack, **try having a drink first**, often we think we're hungry when we're thirsty.

### Keep active

If possible, try and **go for a walk** every day. This will help you lose weight and will help you get back to the things you enjoy.

**Activity that includes movement benefits your health and wellbeing.**

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Getting better after illness:

# Managing pain

Pain is quite common in everyday life. Whether it is a dull background pain or a sharp shooting pain there are always strategies we can use to reduce its impact on our lives.

There are a number of reasons why you may be experiencing muscle aches and pains following illness such as reduced activity levels but **over time this should settle down.**

Pain can have a large impact on our lives, it can wake you in the night, cause feelings of irritability and anxiety and can result in changes to concentration.

Pain is frustrating. You may feel some muscle aches and soreness when you start your normal activities again, **building up gradually** and taking regular breaks can help.

**Everyday gentle activities** like walking or gardening are really helpful because they can dampen the pain signal and help your body get used to normal movement. Physically activity can also be beneficial for your mood.

Remember, **there are some simple techniques that may help you on the next two pages.**



# Everyday Activities

## Change positions

Often when we're ill, we spend a lot of time in bed resting and recovering. Changing position regularly can be really beneficial in reducing pain. If you struggle to remember, **try setting alarms to remind you.**



## Stretch

You can also try stretching, this can release the pressure on your pain receptors.



Stretching examples  
from the Pain Pathways website



# Sleep

## Additional resources

It can often be hard to get to sleep when you are in pain. See our **Sleep and Rest section** for more tips.



### Sleep and Rest

Top tips on sleep and rest for getting better after an illness



## Relaxation

If pain wakes you, try to practise relaxation techniques.



### Headspace

Resources to help distract you from your pain, including podcasts, mindfulness and meditation.





# Support

## Talk to your GP or pharmacist

Your GP or pharmacist will also be able to talk about other options to help you with your pain recovery.

**Taking regular pain medication for a short period of time could help with symptoms.** For pain lasting more than a couple of weeks contact your local pharmacist.

How your pharmacist can help



## Self-management courses

If you are struggling with pain, consider trying some self-management courses to reduce pain.



### The Education Programme for Patients (EPP)

Specific courses on helping people cope and manage pain



Pain workbook



## Keep in touch with your loved ones

Keep in touch with friends and family, consider going for short walks with them (if guidelines allow).

### Remember:

**If you are concerned at all contact your healthcare professional for further resources to help manage pain.**



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Getting better after illness:

# Sleep & Rest

Sleep and rest are crucial to your recovery.

Getting plenty of rest is arguably the most important strategy when it comes to getting back to your usual self after an illness.

Aim to add at least an extra hour to your normal sleep time whenever you feel illness creeping in, either by going to bed earlier or sleeping in later (or ideally both).

When you experience pain you may also find that your sleep is disturbed or can be interrupted by bad dreams so you may need to add a few small naps during the day.

**There are tips to help you sleep and rest on the next page.**



# Your Health

## Expect to sleep more

The sleep will boost your immune system.

## Coping with breathlessness

If you are breathless, congested or coughing a lot, **raise your pillows** so that you are more upright as you sleep.

## Pain management

Talk to your pharmacist or doctor about your pain medication. Additionally, check out the web page on pain management below.

## Anxiety management

**Bad dreams and nightmares often occur after illness** – they can be associated with overheating so try to adjust as needed. Have a look at the resources below before you go to sleep and/or if you wake up from a nightmare.

Self-soothing and anxiety reduction techniques



# Where you sleep

## No TV or electronics

Don't have any TV's, electronic gadgets etc. in the room where you sleep and **stop using them at least 2 hours before bed.**

The blue light on screens reduces the production of hormones that help you sleep (melatonin).



## Room temperature

Try to get the temperature of the room right for you. Have more than one bed cover available so that you can add or remove covers. Some people find that **fresh air from an open window** helps sleep.

## Noise

If noise or light are an issue wear earplugs or an eye mask.





# Your Lifestyle

## Food

Try to eat a diet rich in **rice, oats and dairy products** which can increase our desire to sleep.

## Limit caffeine and sugars

**Drink less caffeine** (tea and coffee), towards the end of the day, **avoiding chocolate and sugary foods** late in the day can improve your sleep too.

## Avoid alcohol

Avoid alcohol as though it may make you sleepy, **it affects the quality of your sleep and rest.**

## Do some physical activity each day

If possible do some exercise, such as a walk, but do this in the morning if you can, to avoid an energy surge before bed.



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Getting better after illness:

# Worry, low mood & anxiety

Recovering from illness often affects our emotions and can include having higher levels of anxiety, low mood and additional worry about whether we will recover fully.

You may find that previous emotional issues or some symptoms of mental health problems can return.

This can be difficult to understand as we generally start to feel better and we may try to dismiss these feelings. Worrying or thinking negatively about your recovery and symptoms may increase your levels of anxiety or stress, this can affect the time recovery takes.

Try to remember that this is a time of physical and psychological stress that **should resolve with time** and consider using some of the top tips below to help you manage some of the worry or change in mood you are experiencing

- **Follow advice to support your emotional wellbeing**
- **Reduce your worries about continued symptoms**
- **Do things that bring you pleasure**



# Reduce your worries about continued symptoms

Here are few things you can do to help:

## Write down your concerns

When you start to worry, write down your concerns and the possible consequences, both negative and positive.

## Symptoms

Limit the time you look up your symptoms on the internet, in newspapers or magazines.

## Talk to a professional

Seek reassurance by talking to a health professional about the likelihood of the symptoms being a sign of something more serious.

## Do things that bring you pleasure

**Try to do something each day that makes you smile and/or helps you to relax.**

It could be a hand massage, taking a leisurely bath, meeting a friend, reading your favourite book or magazine or video-calling friends or family.





# The 5 Ways to Wellbeing

An evidence based approach to improving your mental and physical health.

**melo**



Helping you look after your mental wellbeing.

Visit **melo.cymru** — mental health and wellbeing resources, courses, helplines and local opportunities. Delivered to you by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board.



## Connect

**Keep in contact with people you love.** Say hello to people who pass you when you are outside. Connecting with people whether friends, family, neighbours or strangers helps our emotional wellbeing.



## Be active

**Try to do something active every day.** This can be as simple as having a dance while you brush your teeth or taking a walk to the end of your garden.



## Keep learning

**Try new things often.** This can be as simple as walking around unfamiliar parts of your neighbourhood or learning a new language in your spare time.



## Take Notice

**Start to pay attention to the present moment, your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you,** it can help improve your mental wellbeing.

Examples include sitting quietly to watch the birds outside your window, paying attention to your breathing, or slowing down and really noticing the food you are eating.



## Give

**Doing something nice for a friend, or a stranger is not only good for them.** Being kind to others helps lower our own stress.

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