

# COVID-19 physiotherapy advice



**Information for patients**

Therapy Services



**PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



Different people are likely to have different problems due to the impact of COVID-19. Listed below are some of the common problems you may experience during or after the illness. Some people recover quickly and do not require much support, while others will need more time.

- **Breathlessness:** This is a key feature for many people with this condition. If you have been admitted to hospital it is likely that you have become short of breath as your lungs work harder to provide oxygen to your body. This may mean that you breathe faster and shallower. Some people feel anxious as simple daily tasks become harder.
- **Phlegm:** Most people cough and clear phlegm throughout the day without noticing. With COVID-19 you may have a dry cough, but some people develop phlegm as the course of their illness progresses. This can depend on your underlying health conditions, or it may just be how you are being affected by the virus.
- **Fatigue, reduced mobility and muscle weakness:** Being unwell and recovering from this illness may leave you feeling very tired. You may feel you need to stay in bed or rest more. This can lead to muscle weakness.
- **Reduced physical fitness:** All of the problems listed above can have an impact on your daily activities, the distance you are able to walk and the amount you can achieve each day. This is known as de-conditioning.

Physiotherapy can help with many of the problems listed above.

Whilst in hospital, your treatments will be progressed by your physiotherapist. Please just complete the specific tasks that are selected for you.

If you feel worse whilst completing any of these tasks please **stop**, until reviewed by your physiotherapist. If you have already been discharged, please consult your GP if you have any concerns.

# What strategies can I use to help with my breathing?

## Resting positions

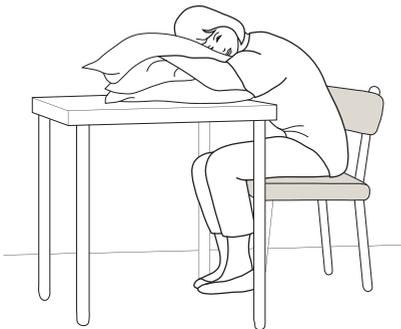
These positions may make it easier for you to breathe. They may also help the long-term recovery of lung tissue and can greatly improve your oxygen levels. Also, for some people, phlegm is easier to clear with this change in position. Here are some examples:

### High side lying:



- Lie on your side
- Use multiple pillows, or lift the head of the bed up with your bed controls
- Bend your knees a little

### Supported forward sitting:



- Sitting on a chair, lean forward on a table
- Pillows may be added to support your head

## Forward sitting:



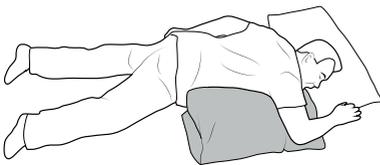
- Sit leaning forward
- Rest your forearms on your knees
- Relax your chest and shoulders

## Supported standing:



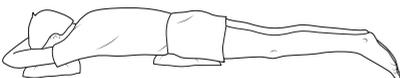
- Stand leaning forward onto a chair or bench, or against a wall
- Let your chest and shoulders relax

## Lying prone:



**Only use this position if advised by your physiotherapist or doctor.**

They will advise you to lie on your tummy for certain times in the day.



You may need to use a few pillows to help you find a position that's comfortable; particularly for your neck and shoulder to avoid a stretch, and to support your ankles and feet.

# Breathing techniques

## Breathing control

Once you have found a comfortable position, the aim is to move from fast upper chest breathing to relaxed, gentle breathing. To do this you can;

- Place one hand on your stomach
- Breathe in through your nose and feel your stomach gently move out
- Breathe out through your nose or mouth, feel your stomach relax and move in
- Try to make your breath out last for twice as long as your breath in

## Pursed lip breathing

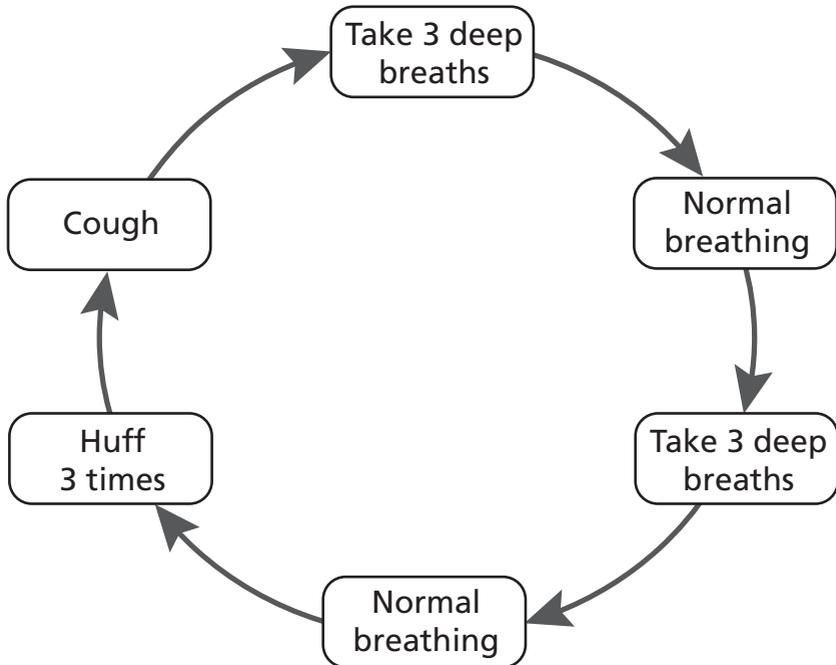
This may also be useful during activities that make you breathless;

- Breathe in gently through your nose
- Breathe out with your lips pursed as if you are whistling
- Try to blow out as long as comfortable (do not force your lungs to empty)

# Techniques to clear phlegm

Clearing phlegm is important as it will improve your oxygen levels and help make breathing easier.

## Active cycle of breathing technique



The above breathing cycle includes:

- Deep breathing exercises
  - Breathe in slowly as far as you can, thinking about your lower ribs moving outwards as much as possible. Hold your breath for 3 seconds. Then relax as you breathe out.
- Huffs
  - Take a medium breath in and breathe out hard and fast with your mouth open, as if you are trying to steam up a window

# How can I help prevent de-conditioning and start physical recovery?

It is inevitable after an episode of COVID-19 that you will lose some muscle strength. However, the advice below will help minimise this and start the process of physical recovery.

## Early mobility

Whilst in hospital it is important, wherever possible, to try and stay mobile, or complete some form of exercise each day. This will maintain your strength, prevent de-conditioning and help you recover more easily.

Getting out of bed is important, even when you don't feel well or are feeling tired.

Getting up can help your:

- breathing
- blood pressure
- muscle power
- bone density
- bowel function
- exercise tolerance.

The therapists and nursing staff will encourage you to get out of bed when you are medically well enough to do so.

Some patients may need further assessment if they are struggling with mobility. You may require a chair that gives you extra support.

## **Physical exercise**

In order to maintain or regain activity levels, aim for;

- short periods of exercise
- done regularly throughout the day
- gradually increase as your stamina improves

It is normal to be out of breath and for your heart rate to increase with exercise, but this should return to normal within five minutes after finishing.

Exercising at moderate levels will help increase endurance and lung function however, it is really important to exercise within the limits of your fatigue.

## **Pacing**

This is a way of increasing your activity level without stirring up your fatigue too much.

When first starting to exercise, aim 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. Try to stop doing an activity before you get tired rather than pushing through the tiredness.

How to use pacing:

- Work out what you can manage to do now
  - Consider how much you can do on a good day and a bad day
- Decide on a realistic build up rate
  - Try and progress at a steady rate. Don't do too much too soon and then have to rest for days to recover
  - Don't be tempted to do too much on a good day

Please refer to the booklet on energy conservation for more information. Links to the videos on pacing and how to exercise at the right level are featured on page 14.

## **Setting rehabilitation goals**

You may like to set yourself small goals to reach by the end of each week. This can help you feel a sense of achievement and see your progress.

Consider writing down things you want to achieve in the near future and things that will take longer to achieve.

## **Regaining function**

It can feel like a series of stepping stones to feel normal again.

Do as much for yourself as possible but ask for help if needed.

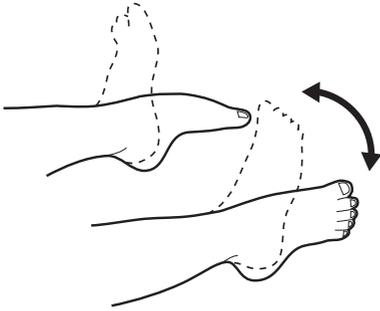
Getting back to your normal self will take time. You may need ongoing rehabilitation or provision of an exercise programme on discharge.

Below there are some general exercises, the physiotherapist will select ones that are suitable for you.

If you experience chest pain, dizziness or severe shortness of breath, stop and contact a healthcare professional.

A slight soreness the day after exercising is quite normal.

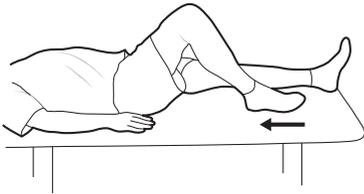
## Ankle pumps



- Lie on your back with your legs straight.
- Bend and straighten your ankles.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

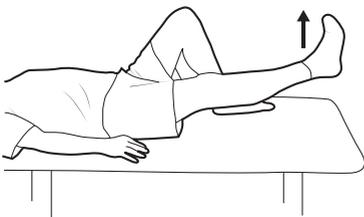
## Heel slides



- Slide heel up towards your bottom, bending your knee.
- Straighten back down.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

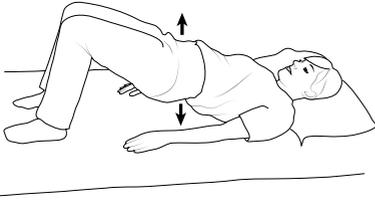
## Straight leg raise whilst lying down



- Squeeze your thigh muscles. Keeping your leg straight, lift it off the bed by about 10cm.
- Slowly lower it to the bed.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

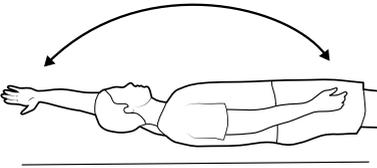
## Bridge



- Lie on your back.
- Bend both knees and lift your bottom off the bed.
- Hold for 2-3 seconds, slowly lower your hips.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

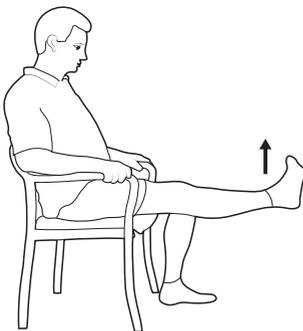
## Shoulder flexion whilst lying down



- Lying on your back.
- Lift up one arm above your head, keeping your arm close to your ear.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

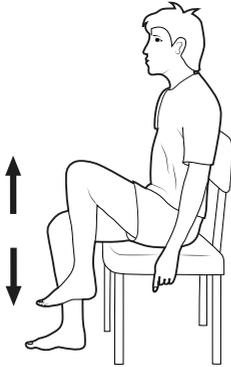
## Leg extension



- When seated in a chair, straighten your leg as far as you can, hold for 2-3 seconds.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

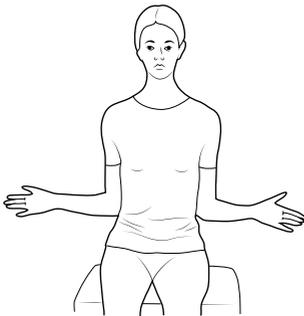
## Seated marching



- When seated in a chair, lift each leg alternately, as if you were marching.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_ seconds

## Shoulder lateral rotation



- Sit or stand.
- Keep upper arms close to your sides, and elbows at right angles.
- Turn forearms outwards.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

## Alternating shoulder press whilst sitting



- Alternating arms.
- Push your arm up towards the ceiling.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

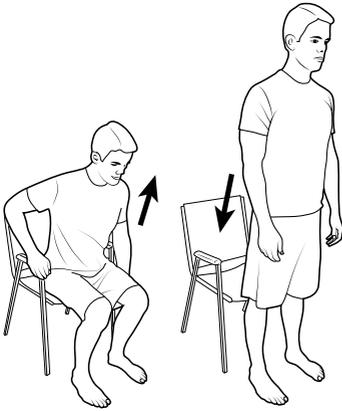
## Bicep curls



- Bend and straighten your elbow.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

## Sit to stand



- When seated in a chair, have your feet hip-width apart.
- Stand up, and slowly sit down onto the chair.

Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

## Marching on the spot



- Standing march on the spot  
Repeat \_\_\_\_\_ seconds

## Where can I find further information?

For more information about recovering from COVID-19 and for help managing your recovery visit:

- <http://www.csp.org.uk/recovery>
- <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/>
- <https://youtu.be/hlGYdjcZi7M> Managing your energy and daily activity
- <https://youtu.be/6FueYwVel3w> Question & Answer session on common issues for Covid-19 recovery

# Your notes

Use this page as you wish. You may find it helpful to write down any questions you have or to record your own personal goals.



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