

# Returning to Your Daily Activities and Exercise While Recovering from COVID-19

**For patients going home after being in the hospital**

Read this brochure to learn about:

- common symptoms of COVID-19 and how they affect your recovery
- how to manage your symptoms so that you can get back to your daily activities at home safely
- how to start exercising safely when you are ready

## Recovering from COVID-19

COVID-19 affects your breathing, but it also impacts your physical and mental health:

- You may feel weaker than usual.
- You may have symptoms like shortness of breath and fatigue that make it hard to return to your daily activities.
- You may find it hard to concentrate or think quickly.
- You may feel difficult emotions that stop you from doing the activities you enjoy.

The time it takes to recover from COVID-19 is different for everyone. It can take weeks to months for some people. The time it takes for your symptoms to get better depends on many factors such as your age, other health conditions you may have, and how sick you were while in the hospital.

## What are common COVID-19 symptoms and how will they affect my daily activities?

### Shortness of breath

Shortness of breath is the feeling of not having enough air to breathe. Shortness of breath can make it harder to do normal daily activities such as walking, climbing stairs, getting dressed, cooking and cleaning.

### How can I manage my shortness of breath at rest?

- When you are resting, try lying on your stomach if you can. This helps air flow evenly in your lungs and improve your breathing. Learn [how to lie on your stomach \(prone position\) safely](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/How_To_Lie_On_Stomach_Safely_Prone_Position_COVID.pdf) ([https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health\\_Information/Health\\_Topics/Documents/How\\_To\\_Lie\\_On\\_Stomach\\_Safely\\_Prone\\_Position\\_COVID.pdf](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/How_To_Lie_On_Stomach_Safely_Prone_Position_COVID.pdf))

- Practice deep breathing:
  1. Find a comfortable position (sitting or lying).
  2. Place one hand on your stomach.
  3. Breathe in slowly through your nose. As you breathe in, you should feel your stomach push your hand out
  4. Breathe out slowly and gently through pursed lips like you are blowing out candles. Your hand should slowly move back in as you blow air out of your lungs.
  5. Repeat this for 5 to 10 more breaths. Do this once a day or more as needed.

**How do I check my shortness of breath before I start or continue doing an activity?**

Check your shortness of breath before you start a new activity, and before you keep going (continue) with an activity. You can do this by rating your shortness of breath on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no shortness of breath and 10 is the worst shortness of breath. This is called the Modified Borg Scale.

<b>My shortness of breath is:</b>	<b>When I'm resting I feel:</b>	<b>Can I start or continue doing an activity?</b>
0 to 2 (none to mild)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not hard for me to breathe</li> <li>• I can easily speak in sentences to have a conversation</li> <li>• The pace or depth of my breathing is the same or has changed slightly</li> </ul>	Yes, you can start or continue doing an activity.

<b>My shortness of breath is:</b>	<b>When I'm resting I feel:</b>	<b>Can I start or continue doing an activity?</b>
3 to 6 (moderate to somewhat severe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breathing feels like it requires more work</li> <li>• I can still speak in sentences but it's more difficult</li> <li>• I feel the pace or depth of my breathing has changed moderately (I need to breathe more quickly)</li> </ul>	Yes, but do an easier or shorter activity. Take rests when you need to.
7 to 10 (very severe to maximum)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breathing is very hard</li> <li>• It's difficult to speak in sentences (I can only say 1 to 3 words at a time)</li> <li>• I feel like I can't breathe quickly or deeply enough</li> </ul>	Do not start an activity. Stop what you are doing and rest.

**How can I expect my breathing to feel if I do an activity?**

- It is normal to feel mild to moderate (0 to 6 on the scale) shortness of breath when you do activities such as walking around your home, or getting dressed.
- When you rest or stop the activity, your shortness of breath should return to mild (0 to 3 on the scale).
- If your shortness of breath becomes severe (7 to 10 on the scale), stop what you are doing and rest in a recovery position:
  1. Sit down and lean forward, bracing your hands or forearms on your thighs or a table.
  2. Once your breathing slows, take some deep breaths.
- If your shortness of breath does not get better, call your health care provider.

Recovery from COVID-19 may be longer than expected. As you recover, listen to your body. Rest when you are tired. Do not rush to increase your activity level.

## **Fatigue (feeling extremely tired)**

Fatigue is a feeling of tiredness that does not go away, and does not improve with sleep or rest. Fatigue affects your quality of life, including how you use your body and mind. Even activities you enjoy like reading or talking on the phone can make you feel tired.

Returning to your daily activities slowly and gradually will reduce your fatigue and build up your energy. Do a little more each day and week. You may need help from friends or family, or you may need to do activities a different way.

### **How can I manage my fatigue and increase my energy as I recover?**

- Start with basic self-care activities such as brushing your teeth, washing your face, having a bath or shower and getting dressed.
- Try doing light housework such as washing the dishes or folding laundry.
  - If you need to, sit in a chair while you complete these activities and slowly. If you are able, try standing, reaching or bending.
- Pace yourself.
  - Take frequent rests before you get tired.
  - Break large tasks into smaller steps that are easier to manage and spread them over several days if needed.
  - Switch between light and heavy work or easy and hard tasks.
  - Do not rush. Allow enough time for each activity.
- Breathe deeply and relax.
  - Slow deep breathing is relaxing and will help you to pace yourself. For example, as you unload the dishwasher, take slow deep breaths in and slow full breaths out.
- Plan when and how to do activities.
  - Make lists of your activities.

- Spread activities throughout the day and week.
- Sit down while doing activities.
- Plan ahead and prepare supplies to reduce extra trips, and avoid rushing and becoming too tired.
- Prioritize your tasks.
  - Try to do what is most important first.
  - Ask yourself the following questions before beginning any tasks:
    - “What things must be done today?”
    - “Should I do this task?”
    - “Why is this task needed?”
- Leave less important activities for another time or for someone who can help.

## Thinking skills

Being in the hospital for a long time can affect your thinking skills. You may feel like things are ‘foggy’ or that it is hard to focus your mind or concentrate. This is normal and gets better with practice.

Work on your thinking skills so that you can return to your daily activities and prepare for things like going back to work.

### How can I practice my thinking skills?

- Keep track of important information using an agenda or a notepad.
- Read a magazine or book. Slowly increase the length of time you spend reading.
- Think about tasks you did before you were sick. For example, start looking at the bills if you used to handle them. If it is too hard, ask for help.
- Since things may be ‘foggy’ or it may be difficult to focus, try to avoid making large or important decisions at this time. For example, a career change, buying a house, or making decisions about your money. If you do need to make an important decision, ask a trusted family member or friend for help.

- Try putting ideas into words. For example, read an article and then summarize it for a friend or family member.
- Do puzzles like a Sudoku or crossword.

An occupational therapist can help you achieve your goals, such as:

- returning to your daily activities
- improving your thinking skills
- getting back to what is important to you and the activities that you enjoy

[Find an occupational therapist](https://otontario.ca/find-an-ot/) (<https://otontario.ca/find-an-ot/>) in your community.

## **Mood changes**

After being in the hospital with a serious illness you may feel difficult emotions, or changes to your mental health.

You might feel:

- worried
- scared
- angry
- anxious
- worthless
- irritable

These difficult emotions can make you feel disconnected from the people in your life. You might not be interested in activities that you used to enjoy. Tell your health care team or primary care provider if you feel this way. They can help you find the support you need.

## **Exercising while recovering from COVID-19**

Exercise is an important part of regaining the strength and energy lost during your hospital stay due to COVID-19. This is a structured type of physical activity that is planned to improve your fitness, muscle strength and mental health.

## When can I start to exercise?

Once you can do your daily self-care activities without feeling tired or short of breath, you can start to exercise.

**Remember:** Before you start to exercise, talk to your health care provider first to see what types of physical activities and exercises are safest for you.

## What kind of exercise should I do?

### Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercises use large muscle groups and make your heart beat faster. Do moderate aerobic activities that make you sweat a little and breathe harder. Examples include brisk walking or riding a bike.

### Strength training

Strength training builds your muscles and makes your bones stronger.

You can strengthen your muscles by lifting weights or using exercise bands. These activities can be done standing or seated. Try to do these activities at least 2 days per week.

For examples of strength training exercises, visit the [ParticipACTION website](https://www.participaction.com) (<https://www.participaction.com>).

If you have questions, a physiotherapist in the community can help develop an exercise program that is right for you. [Find a physiotherapist](https://opa.on.ca/physiotherapists) (<https://opa.on.ca/physiotherapists>) in your community.

## How do I start to exercise?

It's important not to rush into it right away. Start by doing shorter, more frequent sessions of exercise.

Learn about exercises you can start with: [Early Mobility When Self-Isolating With COVID-19](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Early_mobility_when_self_isolating_with_COVID19_at_home.pdf) ([https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health\\_Information/Health\\_Topics/Documents/Early\\_mobility\\_when\\_self\\_isolating\\_with\\_COVID19\\_at\\_home.pdf](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Early_mobility_when_self_isolating_with_COVID19_at_home.pdf))



You can also try a walking program. Start with shorter, more frequent walks. Slowly increase the length of your walks and the number of days you walk every week. Try to build up to walking at least 3 to 5 days each week.

**Here is an example of a walking program:**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Walk for</b>	<b>Times per day</b>	<b>Total time per day</b>
1	10 minutes	3	30 minutes
2	15 minutes	2	30 minutes
3	20 minutes	2	40 minutes
4	25 minutes	1	25 minutes
5	30 minutes	1	30 minutes
6	25 minutes	2	50 minutes
7	30 minutes	2	1 hour

**For more information**

- [Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines](https://csepguidelines.ca/adults-18-64/)  
(<https://csepguidelines.ca/adults-18-64/>)
- [Find a Physiotherapist](https://opa.on.ca/physiotherapists/) (<https://opa.on.ca/physiotherapists/>) on the Ontario Physiotherapy Association website
- [ParticipACTION Guidelines for Physical Activity](https://www.participation.com)  
(<https://www.participation.com>)
- [Find an Occupational Therapist](https://otontario.ca/find-an-ot/) (<https://otontario.ca/find-an-ot/>) on the Ontario Society of Occupational Therapists website