**Recovery after COVID-19: Information for schools**

Everyone’s experience of COVID-19 is different. Most people recover quickly, without any persistent symptoms or long-term problems. However, a small minority of people can have symptoms or problems that last for weeks or months after the initial infection1. This document provides information about the post COVID-19 recovery period, and what you might expect to happen. It also includes some signposting links to additional material and support that you may find helpful.

# Terminology

National guidance describes three main phases following infection with COVID-192:

* ***Acute COVID-19:*** Signs and symptoms of COVID‑19 for up to 4 weeks.
* ***Ongoing symptomatic COVID-19:*** Signs and symptoms of COVID‑19 from 4 weeks up to 12 weeks.
* ***Post-COVID-19 syndrome:*** Signs and symptoms that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID‑19, continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis. It usually presents with clusters of symptoms, often overlapping, which can fluctuate and change over time and can affect any system in the body.

The terms ‘long COVID’ and ‘post COVID’ are often used to cover both ongoing symptomatic COVID‑19 and post‑COVID‑19 syndrome2.

# How common is long COVID?

Many people who are infected with COVID-19 feel better within a few days or weeks and most will make a full recovery within 12 weeks1,3,4. However, a small proportion of people may experience persistent symptoms or problems after that time1,3,4. It is very difficult to provide an accurate figure for this proportion, and estimates vary depending on the methods used to calculate it. Using three different approaches, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) recently estimated that between 3% and 12% of people infected with coronavirus have symptoms 12 weeks after the initial infection5.

When looking at the UK population as a whole, survey data suggests that as of 2 January 2022, around 1.3 million people (2.1% of the population) were experiencing self-reported long COVID (defined as symptoms persisting for more than four weeks after the first suspected coronavirus infection that were not explained by something else)6. This figure includes 44,000 children aged between 2 and 11 (0.54% of this age group), and 73,000 young people aged between 12 and 16 (1.87% of this age group).

It is important to note that many people with long COVID will only have mild symptoms. The ONS estimate that of those with self-reported long COVID, 63% have some limitation to their day-to-day activities, and 18% are "limited a lot"6.

# Who might be affected?

We are still learning about whether certain groups of people are more likely to experience persistent symptoms than others. However, the likelihood of developing long COVID does not appear to be linked to the severity of the initial COVID‑19 infection. We know that even people who had mild symptoms during their initial infection (and were not hospitalised) can develop long COVID1,2. UK data suggests that long COVID may be more common in females, people already in poor health, older age groups and people with asthma, overweight or obesity2,6.

Some people infected with COVID-19 may not have been tested for the disease, especially if they were infected early on in the pandemic. This means that people can still be diagnosed with long COVID even if they have not had a positive test2.

# What symptoms do people experience?

Long COVID affects people in many different ways, and our understanding of it is still evolving. The most commonly reported symptoms are; extreme tiredness (fatigue), shortness of breath, cough, probems with sleep, anxiety and depression, loss of smell and/or taste, and problems with memory and concentration ("brain fog")2,6. However many other symptoms have been reported. These include (but are not limited to)1:

* post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
* tinnitus, earache
* feeling sick, diarrhea, stomach pain, loss of appetite
* a high temperature
* headaches
* sore throat, nasal congestion
* chest pain or tightness
* heart palpitations
* dizziness
* pins and needles
* joint and/or muscle pain
* problems with vision
* hair loss
* rashes

Evidence suggests that some of these symptoms can occur in clusters, and that they often come and go, rather than remaining constant7-9. People with long COVID report that relapses can occur in an irregular pattern, or in response to specific triggers7,8.

Some symptoms are **less** commonly reported in children and young people than in adults2. These include shortness of breath, persistent cough, heart palpitations and chest pain2.

# Where can people find support and advice?

## Recovery from COVID-19 can take time. The length of time will vary from person to person, as will the symptoms. It's important that people don’t compare themselves to others.

## We have listed some useful sources of information and support. People may also find it helpful to join a support group or to talk to other people who are in a similar situation.

## Online NHS resources

Further information is available on the [NHS web page on the long-term effects of coronavirus](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/long-term-effects-of-coronavirus-long-covid/).

The NHS [Your Covid Recovery website](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/) contains a wealth of advice for people on recovery after infection with COVID-19. It has information on managing a range of symptoms, including breathlessness, fatigue, anxiety, low mood, cough, musculoskeletal pain, problems with taste, smell, voice, swallowing, insomnia, memory, and concentration. It also has information for family, friends, and carers, and provides advice about supporting wellbeing, managing daily activities, returning to work and when to seek help.

The [NHS Inform website](https://www.nhsinform.scot/long-term-effects-of-covid-19-long-covid/) also has lots of information and support about long COVID, including material in different languages, and an [information booklet](https://www.sign.ac.uk/patient-and-public-involvement/patient-publications/long-covid/).

## Resources for specific symptoms or problems

### Fatigue

Fatigue is very common in people recovering from COVID-19 infection3,4 . If this is a problem, people may find it useful to look at the fatigue section on the [Your Covid Recovery website.](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/)

Other useful resources include:

* The British Association for CFS/ME guide on the [management of post-viral fatigue](https://www.bacme.info/sites/bacme.info/files/BACME%20Post%20Viral%20Fatigue%20A%20Guide%20to%20Management%20May2020.pdf).
* The Royal College of Occupational Therapists advice for people recovering from COVID-19, including; (i) [how to conserve your energy](https://www.rcot.co.uk/conserving-energy), (ii) [managing post-viral fatigue for people who have been treated in hospital](https://www.rcot.co.uk/how-manage-post-viral-fatigue-after-covid-19), and [managing post-viral fatigue for people who have recovered at home](https://www.rcot.co.uk/how-manage-post-viral-fatigue-after-Covid-19-0).
* The Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust (LSCFT) Pain and CFS/ME Service [video on pacing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBDh9DvKlcU&feature=youtu.be), available on the Trust YouTube channel.

### Psychological support

The [Your Covid Recovery website](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/) [has sections on managing; (i) fear and anxiety, (ii) mood and frustration and (iii) memory and concentration.](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/)

The NHS [Every Mind Matters website](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/) also has expert advice and practical tips to help people look after their mental health and wellbeing. This includes information about COVID-19 and wellbeing. In addition, the LSCFT YouTube channel has a useful video on [relaxation and mindfulness](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThttDAehBjE&feature=youtu.be).

[The Lancashire and South Cumbria Resilience Hub](https://lscresiliencehub.nhs.uk/) provides support for all public sector workers and volunteers who have worked through the Covid-19 pandemic and their families. This includes people who work in the NHS, the emergency services, health and social care teachers, council workers and anyone who volunteers with these groups. The hub team consists of psychological therapists and clinical psychologists, who have significant experience of working with stress, distress and trauma. It also includes prescribing pharmacists who provide consultation and review of medication-related issues. To self-refer into this service, people can complete the [online self-assessment and referral form](https://lschub.mayden.co.uk/). They can also contact the Resilience Hub on 01772 520228 or email lschub@lscft.nhs.uk if they would like further information about the service, or if they would like to discuss a potential referral.

Psychological therapies are also available free on the NHS through the local ‘Improving Access to Psychological Therapies’ (IAPT) service. A GP can refer people to IAPT, or they can refer themselves. People can find details of their local IAPT service through the [NHS website](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/). These services offer:

* talking therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), counselling, other therapies, and guided self-help
* help for common mental health problems, like anxiety and depression

A range of other mental health services are listed on the [Healthier Lancashire and South Cumbria website](https://healthierlsc.co.uk/MentalHealthSupport), which are available on an [interactive map](https://www.healthierlsc.co.uk/InteractiveMap).

If people need to talk to someone urgently, the Samaritans are available 24/7 on 116 123 or online at [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org/).

### Difficulty sleeping

Some people can experience difficulty sleeping after infection with COVID-19. This could be because of; (i) the symptoms of COVID-19 (such as cough or breathlessness) making it difficult to sleep, (ii) the experience of being in hospital (if this was required), and (iii) the stress, anxiety or depression caused by being unwell10.

The [Your Covid Recovery website](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/) provides advice on how to improve sleep. There is also general advice on [sleep](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/) and [insomnia](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia/) from nhs.uk, and from the [Every Mind Matters website](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/sleep). LSCFT have produced videos with information on [how to improve sleep](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFwIDnoNsPA&feature=youtu.be) and about [medication and sleep](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdzzfDEP5Ac&feature=youtu.be), which are available on the Trust YouTube channel.

### Breathing difficulties

It is very common for people with COVID-19 to feel breathless both during the acute phase of the illness and whilst recovering10. The [Your Covid Recovery website](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/) has sections on breathlessness and cough, which provide information and tips on how to manage these symptoms.

The [British Lung Foundation](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/coronavirus) also provides advice about COVID-19 (including for people living with a lung condition), and [general advice on long COVID](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/long-covid).

### General support to improve health

If people smoke, now is a good time to stop. They are more likely to be able to stop successfully if they use a combination of stop smoking treatment and specialist help.

They can visit the [NHS Better Health website](https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/) for further information on how to quit and to download the free NHS Smokefree app. There is also information on this website about how to find a [local stop smoking service.](https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/find-your-local-stop-smoking-service/)

For people who are overweight, losing weight has many health benefits. They can visit the [NHS Better Health website](https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/) for tips, apps and to download the free NHS weight loss plan.

They can also access help locally through their GP, or by referring themselves to the FREE [Cumbria weight management programme](https://oviva.com/uk/en/programme/tier-2-weight-management/).

## COVID-19 vaccination

There is not yet enough evidence to say whether COVID-19 vaccination is effective for treating long COVID2.

There is some emerging evidence that COVID-19 vaccines may provide some protection against developing long COVID. A recent ONS analysis reported that people who received two doses of a coronavirus vaccine at least two weeks before a first test-confirmed COVID-19 infection were 41.1% less likely to self-report long COVID at least 12 weeks later, compared with similar study participants who were not vaccinated when infected11. However, further studies are needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

Anyone who is not yet fully vaccinated against COVID-19 is encouraged to follow [current guidance for vaccination](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/coronavirus-vaccine/) to reduce the risk of a further acute infection2.

## Other practical help and support

There is local support available for a wide range of other issues. This includes help and information about finances, benefits, employment, housing, access to food and much more.

People can visit the [County Council webpages](https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/welfare/default.asp) for information about the support available to them. The Cumbria COVID-19 support helpline is available on 0800 783 1966 (Monday to Thursday 9.00am to 5.00pm, Friday 9.00am to 4.30pm). People can also email the helpline team: COVID19support@cumbria.gov.uk.

## Returning to work

Returning to work can be challenging for people who are experiencing persistent symptoms of COVID-19. However, doing the right kind of work is good for mental and physical health10. There is useful advice about going back to work on the [Your COVID Recovery website](https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/your-road-to-recovery/returning-to-work/).

# How can people access specialist long COVID services?

Anyone who thinks that they might have long COVID, and who is worried about their symptoms or needs additional support with their recovery should contact their GP surgery. Their doctor or nurse may examine them and suggest some tests to find out more about their symptoms and rule out other things that could be causing them. They will also be able to provide advice about managing and monitoring symptoms.

If required, their doctor or nurse may refer them to their local long COVID service or a service that specialises in the specific symptoms they have.

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