# Breathing Recovery After Illness

## Including COVID and Pneumonia

This leaflet is designed to support your recovery after illness, such as COVID-19 or pneumonia, by helping you optimize your breathing efficiency and manage breathlessness.

## What Happens to Breathing During Illness?

During acute illnesses, your breathing may change as part of your body's natural response to stress and infection. Common changes include:

- Breathing faster or deeper than usual.
- Breathing through your mouth instead of your nose.

As your illness improves, your breathing should naturally return to normal. However, for some, these changes can persist, leading to habitual, inefficient breathing patterns. This can result in **increased effort to breathe**, causing **fatigue, breathlessness**, and slower recovery.

## Symptoms of Altered Breathing Patterns

If your breathing pattern hasn't returned to normal, you may experience:

- Breathlessness (while resting, moving, or talking).
- Fatigue and low energy levels.
- Muscle tightness or weakness.
- Chest pain or palpitations.
- Tingling sensations in your hands, feet, or nose.
- Headaches.

Recognizing these symptoms is the first step toward recovery.

## Self-Check: Is Your Breathing Pattern Optimal?

Ask yourself:

- Am I breathing through my mouth most of the time?
- Are my shoulders tense and raised at rest?
- Do my shoulders and upper chest move when I am breathing at rest?
- Can I hear myself breathing at rest?

If you answered **YES** to any of these, follow the **Optimal Breathing Guide** below

## Optimal Breathing Guide

At rest, aim to:

- Breathe quietly through your nose.
- Use your diaphragm to breathe, expanding your lower chest (belly breathing).
- Take 8 - 16 breaths per minute.

## Why Nose Breathing?

Breathing through your nose warms, humidifies, and cleans the air, slowing your breathing and encouraging diaphragmatic breathing.

## What is Diaphragmatic Breathing?

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle under your lungs. When you breathe in, it moves downward, making your tummy expand. This helps oxygen reach the lower parts of your lungs efficiently and uses less energy per breath.

## How to Practice 'Optimal Breathing'

- Lie on your back or side, with a pillow under your head and knees. Place one hand on your tummy.
- Close your mouth gently, keep your lips together, and relax your jaw.
- Breathe in through your nose, feeling your tummy rise 'like a balloon.'
- Breathe out lightly through your nose, allowing your tummy to relax.
- Relax and pause after each exhale.
- Check that your upper chest remains still while breathing.
- Let go of tension in your jaw, neck, shoulders, and hands.

**Tip:** Practise this technique frequently for short periods, e.g., a few minutes each hour. Gradually progress to practicing while sitting, standing, and walking.

## Managing Fatigue and Muscle Weakness

**Recovery Tips:**

- Increase activity levels slowly.
- Avoid overdoing it to prevent setbacks.
- Pay attention to how your body responds to exercise and adjust as needed.

**Pacing:**

Spread activities throughout the day, alternating with rest. Divide your day into manageable time slots, including regular recovery breaks.

## Stress, Anxiety, and Breathing

Worry or stress can cause faster, erratic breathing, worsening symptoms. Good breathing techniques can help calm emotions and reduce anxiety.

If you experience recurring distressing memories or feelings of anxiety related to your illness, it could indicate **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. Speak to someone you trust or visit Mind's website (www.mind.org.uk) for advice.

## Helpful Resources

- Videos on good breathing techniques: www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk
- Fatigue and pacing advice: Physios for ME: www.physiosforme.com/covid-19
- Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) www.potsuk.org
- Mental health support and PTSD information: www.mind.org.uk

**Quick Summary to support your body's natural healing process**

- Practice optimal breathing
- Use pacing to manage activity levels
- Allow your mind and body time to recover