

Self-help series fact sheet 2

Managing coughs and breathlessness

One aspect of long COVID which is unique to this condition and not other fatigue conditions such as chronic fatigue is a persistent cough and breathlessness.

This is due to the way the virus affects your lungs, airways and respiratory muscles. If you are less active because you are unwell it may cause your muscles to become weak and in turn your breathlessness to get worse. The good news is that this negative cycle can be turned around by doing some breathing exercises to help regain your strength and your breathlessness should improve.

To start with we will firstly talk about shortness of breath and coughs and ways to help manage these:

- Staying well hydrated – but if you need to cough and don't have a drink nearby, try swallowing repeatedly instead, which mimics the act of sipping water.
- Avoiding caffeine and alcohol as these dehydrate you and dry out your throat.
- Lying down as flat as possible, which can help reduce your heart rate and drain built-up phlegm.
- Trying steam inhalation to help clear phlegm – pour hot water into a bowl, and then hover your head over the bowl – you can cover your head and the bowl with a towel to intensify the effects.



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- Sipping warm fluids to help soothe a sore throat.
- Making sure the rooms you spend most of your time in have good air circulation – you can improve air circulation by opening a window or door.

And of course, if you are a smoker or vaper, these will also worsen your cough so try to reduce their use if you can. Excessive coughing may also change the quality of your voice.

It is helpful to learn practical ways to manage your breathlessness such as breathing control exercises.

You can manage breathlessness by:

1. Remaining calm: stress and anxiety can increase your heart rate, which only increases your breathing rate and breathlessness
2. Trying different resting positions to steady your breathing
3. Getting a battery-operated handheld fan. Many people find using these can help with breathlessness as research shows that a cool breeze from the fan circulates air over the face.
4. Speaking to your GP about whether a pulmonary rehabilitation program may be helpful for you. You can find out more by visiting lungfoundation.com.au.

If you need further information or support please have a look at our website at www.EmergeACT.org.au or the long COVID playlist on our YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@arthritisact3717