



# Swimming after the Covid-19 pandemic

This fact sheet covers information to support you to start swimming and aquatic activity after the pandemic and to help you with any concerns or ongoing symptoms before returning to the water. \*

## Introduction

Everyone in the UK has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and at time of writing over four million people have had the virus so far. We have seen enforced lifestyle changes and the closure of leisure facilities and swimming pools. As a result, many people have become physically deconditioned through shielding or lack of opportunity. Others may have developed symptoms after infection, and some may have been seriously affected after periods of hospitalisation. In two percent of those infected<sup>1</sup> post-viral symptoms due to Covid-19 can be seen beyond six weeks after the acute illness and can affect a number of body systems.

Healthy lifestyles are more important than ever. Keeping physically active, which can include swimming and other forms of aquatic exercise, is key to this. Whilst we continue to learn more about this new illness, medical recommendations based on scientific principles, can promote recovery and a return to optimised health. Well-being includes good physical, mental and social health.

## What is Covid-19?

Covid-19 is a highly infectious disease, which mainly affects the lungs. It has a wide range of severity, with some people showing no symptoms to some becoming critically ill. Common symptoms include a fever, a dry cough and loss of taste and smell. The experience of illness and recovery can differ from person to person. A number of patients are experiencing long term symptoms after the acute illness (sometimes referred to as 'Long Covid'). These lasting effects cover a range of symptoms including:

- fatigue
- muscle and joint pains
- shortness of breath
- chest pain or tightness
- poor concentration and forgetfulness
- palpitations
- dizziness
- anxiety.

Even those who have not been ill may be feeling out of shape and isolated or anxious regarding a return to the pool. Progressive physical activity is a cornerstone of a functional recovery. Water-based activity can be part of formal rehabilitation and should be person-centred, supported by a range of different health professionals.

## Why consider swimming as part of Covid-19 recovery

People often do not realise how good swimming is as an exercise, because they do not feel sweaty while doing so, but the benefits can be significant. Swimming and related activities have been shown to offer benefits due to the unique aquatic environment. These unique properties may be helpful in supporting those who are recovering from Covid-19, and those who are feeling out of shape.

- The warm supportive nature of water is ideal for muscle and joint pains and for those who are overweight.
- A whole body work out promotes flexibility and strength gains without impact loading on joints.
- Appropriate progressive activity helps recondition the heart and blood circulation system.
- Swimming focuses on controlled, rhythmical breathing which can support lung function and help mindfulness, relieving anxiety.
- Moving against the resistance of the water is a good way of building strength, balance and co-ordination.
- There are many options for exercise in the water, even for non-confident swimmers.

## Safety of the pool environment

Although access to pools has been restricted during lockdown periods, swimming pools are one of the safest environments to be in and it is accepted that current water treatment methods used inactivate viruses such as Covid-19. Indoors, pool air circulation systems are also designed to remove the air above the surface, which should also assist in removing any viruses floating in the air.

Most pools provide the benefit of a supervised environment with first aiders available at all times and some may also have specialist wellbeing advisors who can provide support.

Many pools may have also re-organised their timetables due to the pandemic, so it may be worth checking to see what is available and if there are more gentle sessions to choose from.

## When to return to the pool?

- There is no simple answer to this. You need to feel ready and to have sufficiently recovered, such that you are finding day to day tasks easier. You should be able to dress and undress as normal and walk short distances outside at your own pace.
- Many people have pre-existing health conditions which may add limitations where swimming is concerned. But planning ahead and starting gently will make swimming worthwhile for most health conditions.
- Individuals with access to structured rehabilitation can discuss how to re-introduce aquatic activity with their rehabilitation team.

## When not to return to the pool?

- If you develop new symptoms consistent with Covid-19, you should isolate and take the necessary medical advice.
- If you have a continuing raised resting heart rate or fever.
- Continuing shortness of breath on minimal activity (or having known low oxygen saturation levels) would suggest further medical advice is needed.
- When advised against exercise by a medical practitioner or rehabilitation team.

## Tips for swimming after a Covid-19 related infection

### Do:

- attend with a friend or family member for support and look for a quiet session in shallow water the first time.
- pace yourself and keep levels of exertion to comfortable levels initially. The talk test is a simple way to measure intensity by being able to talk comfortably when working at low intensity, or perhaps in between lengths when pool swimming. If you can talk, but not sing, you are working at moderate intensity.
- keep a note of the amount of exercise you do. Monitoring things like minutes completed, lengths swam or repetitions completed, and if possible monitoring heart rate, can help to demonstrate improvements over time.
- simple aquatic exercises, for example, walking in the water, arm sweeps, lunges etc., if you are not ready or able to swim.
- return to pool swimming before open water swimming as this will be less stressful and safer.
- contact your rehabilitation team or General Practitioner for advice, if you develop new symptoms or your condition worsens.

### Don't:

- expect too much too soon from yourself. Feeling tired is normal at first and this should improve with time.

## For further information:

### **<sup>1</sup>Attributes and predictors of Long-COVID: analysis of COVID cases and their symptoms collected by the Covid Symptoms Study App:**

[medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.19.20214494v2](https://medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.19.20214494v2)  
(accessed April 2021)

### **Returning to Pools Guidance Documents (including guidance for competitive swimmers):**

[swimming.org/swimengland/pool-return-guidance-documents/](https://swimming.org/swimengland/pool-return-guidance-documents/)

### **NHS advice on long-covid:**

Long-term effects of coronavirus (long COVID) - NHS ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk))

### **Moving Medicine resources on Covid-19 recovery:**

[movingmedicine.ac.uk/covidrecovery/](https://movingmedicine.ac.uk/covidrecovery/)

### **Supporting your recovery after Covid-19:**

[yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/](https://yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/)

\*This fact sheet has been written by experts based on the best evidence around Covid-19 and will be updated as more information becomes available.