



Swimming following the Covid-19 pandemic

This fact sheet covers information to support people starting swimming and aquatic activity after the pandemic and to provide advice for those with concerns or ongoing symptoms before returning to the water. *

Introduction

Everyone in the UK has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and a large majority of the UK population are likely to have had the virus. 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 infected¹ 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 and can affect blood clotting, inflammation and immunity. 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, shortness of breath, feeling tired or exhausted, an aching body, headache, sore throat, blocked or runny nose, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, feeling sick or being sick. The experience of illness and recovery can differ from person to person. A number of patients are experiencing long term symptoms after the illness (sometimes referred to as 'Long Covid'). These lasting effects cover a range of symptoms including extreme tiredness or fatigue, muscle and joint pains, shortness of breath, chest pain or tightness, poor concentration and forgetfulness, heart palpitations, dizziness, anxiety and depression.

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. This should be person-centred and 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 water-based 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 temperature of water can help reduce muscle and joint pain.
- The supportive nature of water assists movement for those who are overweight by lessening joint impact.
- 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, co-ordination and flexibility.
- There are many options for exercise in the water, even for non-confident swimmers.

Safety of the pool environment

Swimming pools are a safe environment as current water treatment methods inactivate viruses including Covid-19. Indoor pools have air circulation systems to assist in removing any viruses floating in the air above the pool.

Most pools provide the benefit of a supervised environment with first aiders available at all times. Some pools 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?

- People should feel ready, that they have sufficiently recovered and finding day to day tasks easier. They should be able to dress and undress as normal and walk short distances outside at their own pace.
- If someone has any pre-existing health conditions, they should plan ahead and start gently to maximise the benefits of water-based activity. We have developed a range of other fact sheets about supporting swimmers who have a range of health conditions: swimming.org/swimengland/health-and-wellbeing/
- Evidence shows that for people with health conditions the risks of NOT exercising are greater than the risks of exercising.
- If someone has a structured rehabilitation programme, they should talk to their rehabilitation team about introducing aquatic activity.

When not to return to the pool?

- Anyone who develops new symptoms consistent with Covid-19 should isolate and take the necessary medical advice.
- 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:

- encourage attending with a friend or family member for support and look for a quiet session in shallow water the first time.
- encourage swimmers to pace themselves 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 someone can talk, but not sing, they are working at moderate intensity.
- encourage keeping a note of the amount of exercise they do. Monitoring things like minutes completed, lengths swam or repetitions completed, and if possible monitoring heart rate, can help to demonstrate improvements over time.
- encourage simple aquatic exercises if they are not ready or able to swim, for example walking in the water, arm sweeps, lunges etc.
- encourage returning to pool swimming before open water swimming as this will be less stressful and safer.
- encourage swimmers to contact their rehabilitation team or General Practitioner for advice, if they develop new symptoms or their condition worsens.

Don't:

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

For further information:

¹Attributes 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.full-text

Swimming pool water inactivates the Covid-19 virus:

swimming.org/swimengland/swimming-pool-water-inactivates-covid19-virus/

NHS advice on long-covid:

nhs.uk/conditions/covid-19/long-term-effects-of-covid-19-long-covid/

Moving Medicine resources on Covid-19 recovery:

movingmedicine.ac.uk/covidrecovery/

*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.