

SYMPTOM AREAS

Headaches

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Headaches and pain are common symptoms of long COVID





Increased headaches and other pains are common symptoms after a COVID infection. Most headaches are not dangerous and they don't cause damage to the brain. Similarly, most other pains don't indicate actual damage to your muscles and joints (unless you have had recent injury). However, headaches and pain can be troubling and affect your daily activities.

There are many reasons why you may experience headaches and other pain symptoms after COVID. Long COVID symptoms may be due to changes in the nervous system and breathing patterns.

****Important Note****

Sometimes, headaches can be a sign of another problem. Talk to a doctor or another health care professional if you have:

- Fever along with headaches (new or worse than normal)
- Numbness or weakness in your body or problems speaking/seeing along with headaches
- Headaches that often wake you up when you're sleeping

Why headaches and pain happen with long COVID

Reasons related to the nervous system

People with long COVID can have **central sensitivity**, meaning their nervous system becomes **too sensitive** – it perceives and reacts to relatively normal sensations as **dangerous**. This is similar to other Central Sensitivity Syndromes (such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and irritable bowel syndrome). Central sensitivity can lead to symptoms such as headaches and pain, and also other symptoms like stomach upset.

Reasons related to breathing

Many people with long COVID tend to **breathe too quickly and only with their upper chest**. This can cause you to overuse the muscles around your neck and upper chest, which can lead to muscle fatigue and tightness. Breathing quickly can have multiple effects, such as headaches, fatigue, increased muscle tension, spasms, and aches and pain.

Also, some people with long COVID may have a **chronic cough**. This can strain the muscles around the ribcage.

Many people with long COVID **decrease their activity levels** because they feel breathless and fatigued. This can lead to muscles shortening and stiff joints.

All of these factors can make it more likely that you will have headaches, tightness in the chest, and pain in your neck, upper back, and chest.

Optimize your overall health

Improving your overall health can help reduce headaches and pain. Here are some ways to help improve your overall health.

Sleep

- Your body needs consistent high quality rest to heal.
- A lack of sleep can increase headaches and pain.

- If you are having trouble sleeping, see [Sleep Hygiene](#) section for more.

Hydration

- Dehydration is a common cause of headaches and pain.
- Aim to drink a glass of water every hour.
- Avoid drinks with lots of sugar, caffeine, or alcohol.

Nutrition

- Your body needs nutrition to recover.
- Aim for small meals every 3 to 4 hours to keep your blood sugar steady and avoid triggering gastrointestinal symptoms.
- Focus on healthy whole foods (as fresh and unprocessed as possible).
- See [Nutrition](#) section for more.

Food sensitivities

- They can be new or become worse with long COVID.
- Try and identify any new food sensitivities by using a journal and tracking any reactions.
- Try eliminating common foods sensitivities (such as dairy or wheat) from your diet. Nitrates, MSG, aspartame, and highly processed foods are known migraine triggers.

Medications

- Taking too many over-the-counter pain medications can cause rebound headaches.

- People with central sensitivity often experience more side effects from medication.
- Talk to a doctor about your headaches – take notes about when, where, and how often you get headaches and the type of pain you feel.

Mood

- Some people with long COVID have reported experiencing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- These conditions can make headaches and pain worse, and make it more difficult to manage other symptoms.
- If you've noticed that your mood has changed significantly, please don't deal with it alone.

Understand what triggers your headaches

When you have central sensitivity with long COVID, you can become more sensitive to environmental factors (or triggers) that can lead to headaches.

Here are some examples of triggers and ways to reduce or avoid them.

- **Bright lights**

Wear dark sunglasses and/or a wide-brimmed hat. Avoid sitting under very bright lights. Limit screen time. When using screens, try using glare reducing screens and consider blue light blocking. Take breaks every 20 minutes and make sure you look away from the screen.

- **Noise**

Turn off the radio, TV, and other devices. Use earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones only periodically because overusing them can lead to or worsen noise sensitivity.

- **Smells**

Avoid harsh smelling detergents, chemicals, perfumes, and smoke.

- **Temperature**

Avoid overheating. Ensure good ventilation (air circulation).

Make sure to have “true rest”

“True rest” is an important part of [Pacing](#) in long COVID, symptoms tend to get worse by over-exerting yourself (physically, cognitively, or socially/emotionally). Therefore, pacing can be a very effective way to reduce these symptoms.

Try to take at least a 10 to 15 minute rest break every 2 to 3 hours. Take more rest as you need. Find a darker, quieter place – lie down and close your eyes. Turn off your TV and anything else that is noisy or distracting.

Instead, try to clear your mind and practice basic [breath control](#), meditation, or relaxation exercises. It should be something you find calming.

Breath training

If you tend to take quick, shallow breaths or breathe mainly through the upper chest, it's important to try and correct this so that you can avoid systemic effects, including headaches and pain.

Retraining your breathing and doing **breath control exercises** can help, and if you combine them with **pacing** strategies, you may be able to stabilize and see improvements in your symptoms, including headaches and pain.

Adding **relaxation/meditation** exercises have been shown to help calm the nervous system, which can help lower your heart rate and relax muscles. This can help to reduce pain, stress, and fatigue.

To learn more about breath work and how to retrain your breathing, see [Breath Work](#) section of *MyGuide*. To learn more about pacing see the [Pacing](#) section.

Gentle movement

For headaches and pain, gentle stretching of the neck and upper torso can decrease feelings of chest tightness, breathlessness, headaches, and pain in these areas. Muscle aches and pain in other parts of the body can be decreased by gently improving mobility in those areas as well.

It's best to combine this with basic breath control to help calm the nervous system – this will help keep the heart rate and breathing rate lower as well as allow the muscles to relax. These exercises should be low energy expenditure and not result in any increased fatigue or symptoms.

What you can do in the moment

When you're having a headache or a flare up of pain, here are some things you can do that can help reduce your symptoms right away.

- Remove yourself from any triggers (such as bright light and noise)
- Rest immediately – lie down, close your eyes, practice basic breath control, meditate, or do relaxation exercises
- Take medication (oral or topical) – talk to a doctor or pharmacist
- Apply ice or a cold towel on your head or area of the body where you have pain
- Apply heat for muscle pain or tension (such as your back or neck)
- Try gentle range of motion or stretching – as long as it's not painful or takes too much effort
- Try trigger point release (these are gentle massages you give yourself, possibly using a ball) – you can talk to a physiotherapist or

massage therapist

Whatever you choose to do, it should feel calming and soothing to you.

Where to next?

- If you are having trouble sleeping, check [Sleep Hygiene](#) for more information.
- Learn more about [Nutrition](#) and [Pacing](#).
- Check [Breath Work](#) to learn more about how to retrain your breathing
 - Jump to Frame 3 of this topic for the basic breath control exercise.

