

Brain Fog

Category: 2 Symptom

What is brain fog?



Brain fog, also known as cognitive dysfunction, describes issues with your usual cognition or thinking skills. With Long COVID, there is usually no damage to the brain tissue. However, Long COVID can affect how the brain executes tasks on a chemical and cellular level.

Brain fog can impact a person's ability to perform their regular day to day tasks, or their roles and responsibilities at work or at home. A person with brain fog may notice some or all of the following changes:

It is more difficult to pay attention or concentrate on one task or switch between tasks.

- You feel more sensitive to light, sounds, or busy environments.
- You are slower to think and respond in conversation.
- It can feel difficult or tiring to find the right words or carry on a conversation.

- Cognitive tasks (like reading or following a TV show) can tire you out quickly, or you realize you have become very tired after a routine cognitive task.
- It is difficult to remember information you use daily like a password or recent events or details.
- It is difficult to plan or stay organized.

If you are concerned about your cognition (thinking), particularly your ability to operate a vehicle or heavy machinery safely and consistently, please talk to a healthcare provider who is informed about Long COVID. It is important to do a detailed clinical evaluation with or under the guidance of a clinician, [as suggested by the Canadian Guidelines for Post COVID-19 Condition \(CAN-PCC\)](#).

What can you do?

Using self-management strategies for Long COVID can help reduce your brain fog. For people with post-exertional malaise, symptoms including brain fog tend to get worse when they over-exert themselves (physically, cognitively, or socially/emotionally). Therefore, pacing and taking frequent rest breaks can be effective ways to stay within one's energy envelope and reduce these symptoms.

Brain fog may also be made worse by other factors such as poor sleep, mental and emotional health, stress, etc. Tracking your activities and symptoms can help you figure out what triggers or worsens your symptoms so that you can make changes to these activities.

Many people find that the term 'brain fog' can under-appreciate the life changing impacts of this symptom. Often cognition (thinking, learning, understanding) is tied to a person's ability to work as well as their sense of self, and changes can bring on thoughts of shame and frustration and make these symptoms even worse. It can be helpful to explore coping strategies.

In summary, some ways to help your overall recovery and brain fog are:

- Pacing yourself and staying within your 'energy envelope' (see next frames for examples)
- Managing your stress levels
- Getting lots of sleep and rest
- Ensuring that you are getting enough nutrition throughout the day

Pace yourself with cognitive tasks

You may notice that trying to perform cognitive (thinking) tasks in your usual way, such as paying attention to something or thinking at your usual speed, can lead to fatigue and worsening of your other Long COVID symptoms.

Here are some energy conservation and pacing strategies that can specifically help with cognitive tasks:

- Allow yourself extra time to complete a task so you don't feel rushed.
- Break tasks down into steps and write them down (written instructions or checklists) and take breaks between each step. Spread out the tasks over multiple days.
- Limit how long you spend on cognitive activities. You might want to set a timer to limit how long you talk to someone or how long you spend on social media. You might also want to tell people about your limits, such as 'I cannot talk right now' or 'I have only 10 minutes.'
- Take small breaks often when doing cognitively demanding activities. For example, lean back, close your eyes, feel your feet on the floor, and quiet your mind by counting your breaths backwards from 10. Listen to a clip of a nature soundtrack for 30 seconds to a minute, or look out a window.
 - If you tend to get carried away (or hyper focused) on a task, consider setting a reminder to take a small break. Some examples you can use are an alarm, notification in a digital calendar, or a music playlist ending.
- Take longer rest breaks between activities throughout the day. For example, lie down in a quiet room, practice breathing exercises for relaxation, meditate, or use guided mental imagery for 10 to 30 minutes.
- Plan to do more important work at a time of day when you feel more energized and alert and when you are in a quiet, distraction-free environment.
- Avoid multitasking.
- Try to follow the same routines from day to day to avoid getting mixed up or disoriented.
- Delegate. Ask others for help with difficult tasks or decisions.
- Revisit tasks/decisions on another day to give yourself a second opportunity to problem solve and review.
- Print out documents to reduce screen time.
- Rather than interacting with people in person, talk over the phone while sitting or lying down.

Consider your preferences and strengths

Each person has different ways of thinking, learning, and processing information, and your unique cognitive strengths can help you cope with brain fog. For example, this could include recognizing if you prefer to hear things, see things, talk things out, or write things down.

If you prefer to listen or talk things through

- Talk problems out with a friend or family member. Sometimes it can be helpful to have a second opinion and think through problems outside your own brain.
- Listen to information instead of reading. This could include listening to audiobooks, having others leave you voice messages or memos, or using a screen reader or text-to-speech software.

If you prefer to write things down

- Carry a notebook with you to write down things you want to remember.
- Use a day planner with a to do list and consider colour coding your activities.
- Ask other people to write down important information for you and remind you about important dates or events. Perhaps have a friend or family member attend medical appointments with you.
- Consider communicating using text messages or emails if this feels easier than talking over the phone.

If you like using tools and apps

- Set alarms or use sticky-notes as reminders. Consider using multiple systems, and switching it up to keep it interesting. For example, when you turn on the oven or stove, use an alarm on your phone or ask your family/friends/roommates to remind you to turn it off.
- Use technology to simplify things. This could include navigation tools for directions or artificial intelligence to summarize a big document.

Consider your environment

Consider how your environment affects your ability to think. Too much or unpredictable sensory input like noise, bright lights, smells, and movement can cause sensory overload or a feeling of discomfort, anxiety, or stress. Too much sensory input may make brain fog worse.

Here are some strategies to try.

- Find a quiet place to help you focus. Perhaps a room with a door you can close.
- Use tools to help reduce sensory input like ear plugs, noise-cancelling headphones, or sunglasses.
- Turn off background music. If you are near someone who is watching TV or listening to music, ask them to wear headphones.
- Seek out spaces with natural light rather than artificial light.
- Limit screen time when possible and adjust your screen brightness or use screen dimmers.

Communicating when you have brain fog

Communication often involves in-the-moment processing of information, and therefore it can be difficult to manage if you are experiencing brain fog.

Here are a few strategies that may be worth trying:

- Set expectations, such as clear time limits and the need for breaks during a longer conversation. Brain fog, like other Long COVID symptoms, can be difficult for others to understand. Some people prefer

explaining their experience, common challenges, and the support they may need. A helpful tip can be to compare the experience to post-concussion syndrome or a brain injury, which may be more familiar to most people.

- Try to reduce your conversations to only one person at a time. Conversations with multiple people can be more challenging. This is a form of multitasking.
- Use scripts. It can be helpful to prepare some phrases to tell people when you find it difficult to find the right word during a conversation. Here are some examples:
 - 'Do you know the word I am searching for?'
 - 'I haven't had my morning coffee yet!'
 - You may also need to politely jump into conversations with something like, 'I'm sorry I just need to get this out before I lose the thought.'
- For word finding challenges try describing the word or using gestures. Often others will be able to guess the word. You can also think of the opposite or a similar word.

Remember to be kind to yourself and practice self-compassion when communication struggles come up.

How to build up cognitive activity

It can be tempting to push your limits and 'test yourself' by doing more cognitively challenging tasks, like doing a crossword puzzle or brain games. However, doing this can tire you out, make your symptoms worse, increase your stress levels, or lower your mood.

It is important to remember that just like exercising the body, exercising the brain can also cause post-exertional malaise. Finding your energy envelope and symptom stability is an important step before building any type of activity, including cognitive activity.

Cognitive rehabilitation

Cognitive rehabilitation is a set of treatments that:

- Re-trains the brain by practicing previously learned thinking, memory, and decision-making skills to improve them.
- Teaches how to work around any challenges with thinking and processing.

The Canadian Guidelines for Post COVID-19 Condition (CAN-PCC) suggests [using cognitive rehabilitation](#) in people with Long COVID.

Please note that cognitive rehabilitation may worsen symptoms for people with post-exertional malaise (PEM), so make sure to talk to a healthcare provider before attempting cognitive rehabilitation.

Cognitive rehabilitation needs a personalized and tailored approach to ensure the rehabilitation does not increase symptoms. This is called a 'symptom-titrated' approach. When it comes to a symptom-titrated approach to cognitive activities it is important to understand the intensity of an activity. Generally a cognitive activity will be more intense if it involves new and complex information, has a time limit, is completed in a busy environment, and when strategies cannot be used.

It is best to start with something simple, familiar, and not emotionally draining—for example, reading or listening to a familiar, lighthearted audiobook with a simple plot line. It can be helpful to focus on joyful or purposeful tasks that support your quality of life.

Summary

- Pace yourself and stay within your 'energy envelope'
- Use activity and symptom tracking to figure out what cognitive tasks are most difficult for you and which strategies are helpful
- Identify and work to your strengths and preferences. For example, do you like to listen and talk things through or write things down?
- Consider ways to modify your environment (reduce sensory stimulation).
- Find ways to make communicating with others less cognitively draining for you.
- Talk to a healthcare provider to see if cognitive rehabilitation is right for you and how to best approach this treatment. If you have post-exertional malaise, use a symptom-titrated approach.

Where to next?

- Read the recommendation by CAN-PCC on:
 - [NOT using cognitive impairment screening](#)
 - [using cognitive rehabilitation](#)
- Visit healthexperiences.ca and learn about the [symptoms experienced by people with Long COVID](#), including cognitive issues.