

Tested positive for COVID? Go easy on yourself—try not to rush back to work or exercise

November 22 2022, by Clarice Tang



Ask family and friends for help if you're struggling. Credit: Pexels/Andrew Neel

With COVID isolation rules largely gone, some people feel pressured to rush back to work, school, or other activities after testing positive to

COVID.

If your [symptoms](#) are mild, you might be tempted to just keep (remotely) working through your infection, and quickly return to your usual exercise program so you don't lose your fitness.

But while we might be used to bouncing back quickly after other viruses, we need to be more cautious with COVID. Aside from the risk of transmission, over-exertion can exacerbate and prolong your COVID symptoms.

Pushing too hard can set you back

Clinical guidelines [recommend](#) getting adequate rest when you're diagnosed with COVID. Pushing yourself too hard and too early during your recovery from your initial COVID infection may set your progress back.

While around four in five people with COVID have [mild illness](#) and recover [within a month](#), for others, it can take up to a few months or even longer.

When people have symptoms such as fatigue and/or [shortness of breath](#) for three months or more, this is called [long COVID](#). Up to 89% of people with long COVID experience [post-exertional malaise](#), where overdoing physical or [mental activity](#) exacerbates symptoms such as fatigue and causes new symptoms such as pain and anxiety.

So you've tested positive for COVID. How can you tell whether you're well enough to get back to your usual routine?

Here are five tips:

(1) Take your time

If you're feeling sick, use your paid leave entitlements, if you have them, even if it's for a day or two to relax and unwind.

While it may be tempting to return to work quickly after COVID, avoid attending the workplace for at least seven days if you work in a [high-risk setting](#) such as health, disability and aged care. For other workers, it's a good idea to isolate until your [symptoms resolve](#).

If you're feeling fatigued but want to get back to work, you might be able to start with half-days, or working for a few hours, then ramping up to your usual workload.

(2) Pace, plan and prioritize

[Pacing, planning and prioritizing](#) are important while you're still experiencing COVID symptoms:

- pace yourself by spreading out the activities into smaller and more manageable tasks with rest in between
- plan your activities in advance
- prioritize what you need to do over what you would like to do.

If you're struggling with fatigue while recovering from COVID, a referral to an [occupational therapist](#) or physiotherapist can provide further strategies to manage this symptom.

(3) Wait until you're symptom-free for 7 days to

exercise

You might feel ready to start exercising after your symptoms resolve but to avoid overexertion, it's important to wait until you have been free of any COVID symptoms for at least [seven days](#).

Start with light intensity exercises—where you can easily breath, maintain a conversation and feel you could sustain the activity for hours—for 10–15 minutes to begin with.

Only exercise again if you feel recovered from the previous day's exercises, without new onset or worsening of symptoms such as fatigue and pain.

(4) Ask for help

If you do experience more significant symptoms from COVID, consider roping in your friends and family. They may be entitled paid caregiver's leave or even two days of [unpaid caregiver's leave](#) for casual workers if they need to care someone with COVID.

If you are struggling to manage your health and other [financial pressures](#), contact your financial institution to discuss payment plans.

If you work in a high-risk setting such as health, disability and [aged care](#), you may also be entitled to [additional government support](#) to help you through the time when you cannot work because of COVID.

(5) Know when to see your health provider

If you're over 70, (or over 50 with additional risks, or are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person aged over 30 with additional risks), talk

to your GP about [antiviral medicines](#) as soon as you test positive to COVID. Antivirals reduce your chance of severe COVID requiring hospitalization, and are ideally taken within five days of diagnosis.

If you're managing COVID at home, use a [symptom checker](#) to see if you need medical advice for your condition.

If you have ongoing symptoms after your initial COVID infection, make an appointment with your doctor to [monitor your condition](#) and refer you onto other health professionals, where appropriate, to assist with symptom management.

While there are currently no medications to treat COVID symptoms such as fatigue, exercise-based [health professionals](#) such as physiotherapists can set you up with an exercise program and progress it accordingly to reduce [fatigue](#) and assist with breathlessness.

Mahatma Gandhi was right when he said "good health is true wealth", so be kind to yourself when recovering from COVID.

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