

Coping with Long COVID



Having COVID-19 affects us all in different ways. For many of us, bed rest helps with our recovery, and then we can continue with our lives. Unfortunately, for some recovery isn't easy, and symptoms can continue for many months post-infection. This condition is often called Long COVID.

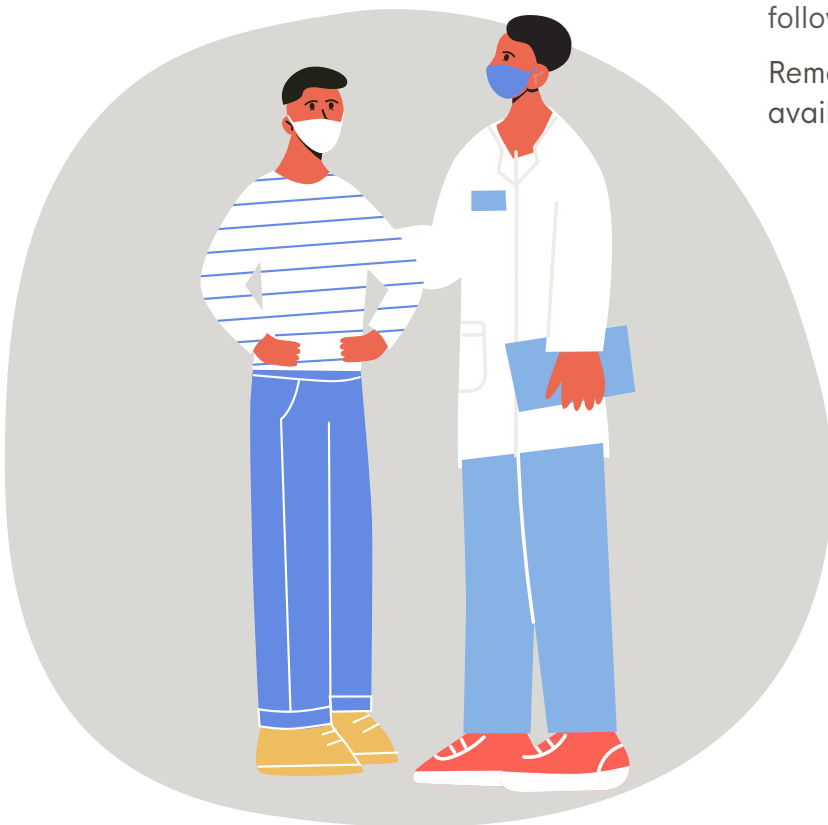
If you've been diagnosed with Long COVID, you may be feeling all sorts of emotions while also experiencing fatigue, headaches or other symptoms. Not knowing how long this condition will last or how to manage it can be hard and make life challenging.

Long COVID can impact on your ability to work, study, exercise, spend time with whānau or friends, and make decisions. It can disrupt your daily life and affect your mental and physical health.

Living with Long COVID may also leave you feeling anxious or depressed. You may feel your experience is dismissed as 'not real' by health professionals, whānau, colleagues or friends. Coping with its effects may also cause relationship, work, study and financial stresses.

If you are experiencing the symptoms of Long COVID, please know you've done nothing wrong – many people are also struggling with fatigue and other long-lasting symptoms following a COVID-19 infection.

Remember, you are not alone and help is available.



There are plenty of little steps you can take on your recovery journey. Go easy on yourself and lean on others for support.

What is Long COVID?

If you've had ongoing symptoms for more than 12 weeks after testing positive for COVID-19, or developed unexplained symptoms following your infection, you may have Long COVID.

Long COVID is described as *"signs and symptoms that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19, continue for more than 12 weeks, and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis. It usually presents with clusters of symptoms, often overlapping, which can fluctuate and change over time and can affect any system of the body."* National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) UK.

The impact of Long COVID varies from person to person, but you may be experiencing:

- **Physical symptoms:** fatigue, muscle weakness, abdominal pain, fever, weight loss, nausea and/or vomiting, breathlessness, cough, post-exertional malaise (PEM).
- **Neurological symptoms:** sleep difficulties, loss of concentration ("brain fog"), memory problems, dizziness, mood changes, joint or muscle pain, continued loss of smell and taste.
- **Cardiovascular symptoms:** chest tightness or pain, fast or irregular heartbeats (palpitations).

Having Long COVID can also affect your mental health and make you feel anxious or depressed. You may notice you're feeling:

- Isolated or lonely, disconnected from whānau and friends who may not have experienced Long COVID.
- Sad, flat, depressed, or having a low mood.
- Worried or anxious about your symptoms or how they are affecting your life.
- Angry or frustrated about the time it's taking to feel better or the lack of treatment or support you are receiving.
- Stressed about negotiating changes to your life as a result of having Long COVID.
- Grief about things that have changed in your life because of Long COVID.

To learn more about anxiety and depression, including the signs to look for and support visit [here](#).

If you think you have Long COVID or are worried about any of your symptoms, talk to your GP or healthcare professional. For more information about Long COVID see the help section on the last page.



Looking after your mental health & wellbeing

Experiencing Long COVID can be difficult. The symptoms and challenges it brings may affect your mental and emotional wellbeing.

Ongoing fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of Long COVID. Living with fatigue can make work, study or just completing daily tasks difficult. It can also affect your mood, leading you to feel anxious or depressed.

To help with your recovery, you may need to slow down and change aspects of your life, which could cause added stress to you and your whānau.

"Managing Long COVID is hard because it's so easy to overdo it. You start feeling a little better and so you do a little bit more and then you're back three steps, you just feel rubbish again."
Larisa, who lives with Long COVID.

In the first instance, being kind to yourself will make a big difference to your recovery.

Tips for coping with Long COVID

Share concerns with whānau & friends

It's important to share how you are feeling with your whānau and supportive friends. That way they'll have a greater understanding of what you're going through and how they can best help you. It's okay to ask for help with things like shopping, meals, household chores, and caring for tamariki/children.

Your employer or education provider should also be able to support you through your recovery journey.

"It always helps to let it out. When it's tough I talk to my husband, and I cry. I often write about it. The process of writing lets me think about it a bit more and see things differently."
Larisa

Plan your days & pace yourself

Having a daily routine can be good for your mood and sense of stability. Creating a plan for your day or week will help you prioritise what needs to be done and what can wait until you have more energy. Break tasks into smaller chunks. Be careful not to overdo it on days when you have more energy.

Be flexible with your plan, pace yourself and listen to your body if it's telling you to rest.



Rest and sleep

Sleep and rest are vital for your body's recovery from any infection. If possible, have short rests throughout the day or just take a break. Getting a good night's sleep helps your body to heal, so it's important to have good sleep patterns. Try:

- Going to bed and getting up at around the same time each day, including on the weekends.
- Avoiding stimulants, like caffeine, alcohol or cigarettes at least three hours before going to bed.
- Relaxing and unwinding before bed by doing calming activities like reading, having a shower or bath, doing gentle stretches or practicing mindfulness or meditation.
- Avoiding exposure to blue lights/screens an hour or so before bed.

For more sleep tips visit [here](#).

Eat a healthy diet

Try to eat a healthy, balanced diet that gives your body the nutrients it needs to recover. If you're unable to eat much, try to eat little, and often. Ask for help, or use delivery or meal services, if you are unable to shop or prepare your own food. Remember to stay hydrated.

Join a support group

While your experience of managing fatigue and other Long COVID symptoms may differ to others, joining a support group (online or face-to-face) can help you to understand more about what is happening to you. It can also help you to feel less alone. (See the last page for support group suggestions.)

You may also find it easier to share how you are feeling with others who are going through something similar than with whānau or friends who haven't had the same experience.

Stay connected

You may not feel like going out, but staying connected with whānau and friends can improve your wellbeing. A quick phone call, message or a short visit may just make your day!

Be kind to your body

While being physically active is proven to boost our wellbeing and decrease stress, depression and anxiety, if you have Long COVID symptoms it is recommended that you seek advice from a health professional before completing any physical activity.

Practising relaxation can help you release tension and feel calm, using breathing techniques, like [Hikitia Te Hā](#) could help. Activities like simply sitting outside and enjoying time in nature can be beneficial too. There are online tools or apps like [Small Steps](#) or [Groov](#) that you may find useful.

And lastly... go easy on yourself

Recovering from an infection and coping with fatigue and other symptoms that affect your mental health is tough. Focus on what you can control and make sure that you're doing things you enjoy or spending time with people you care about. Try not to overdo things or overcommit. Give yourself a breather and be kind to yourself.

"I think a lot about putting the patience into being a patient," Jenene, who lives with Long COVID.

Visit our [Five Ways to Wellbeing webpage](#) for more tips.



Remember that recovery from viral infections can take a long time. It's important that you give yourself the permission and time to rest.

Supporting someone with Long COVID

Listen

Some people with Long COVID report feeling that those close to them don't believe they're ill or will trivialise their symptoms.

Believing or validating what your whānau member or friend is going through as they battle Long COVID helps them to feel heard and supported. It can also make them more comfortable sharing their experience and asking for help.

Be flexible

If your friend or whānau member is experiencing fatigue, their energy levels will fluctuate, and they may need to prioritise where to focus their energy. This may mean plans you've made together could change, sometimes at the last minute. Try to be understanding and flexible if this happens.

Stay in contact

"Helping people with Long COVID can mean just staying in touch. Ask them how they are, see if there is something you can do for them, let people know you are there to help if you can." Larisa

Your friend or whānau member may be housebound or not have enough energy to enjoy activities they normally would.

Continue to reach out to them. A quick message to let them know you care and that you're there if they need you will mean a lot.

Offer to help

If you are able, offer to help with household activities, driving to appointments, childcare and shopping or meal preparations.

Ask them how you can best help.



Caring for tamariki or rangatahi with Long COVID

If your tamariki or rangatahi/young person's COVID symptoms continue beyond four weeks, it's important to see your GP or healthcare provider.

During this time, your tamariki or rangatahi may need to rest more, and it's important they get enough sleep. Some things you can do to help your child:

- Have a daily routine.
- Make sure they are drinking enough water and eating healthy food.
- Encourage them to be out of bed for some time during the day. This could look like walking to the letterbox or sitting outside and getting some fresh air.
- Practise relaxation or other mindfulness techniques. Visit [Sparklers](#) for more at home activities.
- Contact their early childhood centre or school about how they can ease back into classes or what work they can do online.
- Make sure they stay in contact with friends, whether it's in person or online.
- Encourage them to stay positive about their recovery, celebrate small improvements and seek help if you need it, for both you or them.

For more support when looking after tamariki or rangatahi with Long COVID visit [KidsHealth](#) and [Long Covid Kids NZ](#).

Look after you, too

Supporting someone you care about when they have a chronic illness, like Long COVID, can be hard on you too. Make sure you look after your own wellbeing and have a support person you can turn to if things are feeling difficult.

Help & Support for living with Long COVID

Talk to your GP or healthcare provider if you get new symptoms, or your symptoms get worse. They can also connect you to other support services including:

- nutrition and diet advice
- occupational therapy
- physiotherapy
- speech and language therapy
- clinical exercise physiologists
- mental health and wellbeing support.

Join an online or face-to-face Long COVID support group:

- [Long COVID Support Aotearoa](#)
- [Complex Chronic Illness Support](#) (based in Bay of Plenty)
- [Long COVID Kids New Zealand](#)

For more information about living with Long COVID visit:

[Long COVID Online Support Tool](#)

[Long COVID – Health Navigator NZ](#)

[Unite against COVID-19](#)

The following services offer free support 24/7 and can connect you with others who can help you:

- Free call or text 1737 anytime to talk to a trained counsellor.
- Depression helpline – visit [depression.org.nz](#), call 0800 111 757 or free text 4202 (to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions).
- Lifeline – visit [lifeline.org.nz](#), call 0800 543 354 or free text 4357 (HELP).

Other websites and helplines that offer guidance and support include:

- Anxiety NZ 0800 ANXIETY (269 4389) for specific questions around your or your loved ones' anxious feelings. [anxiety.org.nz](#).
- Asian Family Services – free helpline 0800 862 342 (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm). [asianfamilyservices.nz](#).
- Youthline – free text 234, call 0800 376 633, webchat at [youthline.co.nz](#), DM on Instagram @youthlinenz. For young people and their parents, whānau and friends.

For more resources or information visit [mentalhealth.org.nz](#)