

Managing the effects of on the body

Musculoskeletal, shoulder and back pain

What do we mean by joint and muscle problems?

Joint and muscle problems are common and include shoulder, neck, back and knee problems. Many people will have had these at some point in their life. Most of these problems are not serious and improve or get better quickly.

What causes post COVID joint and muscle problems?

Many people will have had some aches and pains before getting ill with COVID. Being unwell may have made these problems come back or get worse. This is because joints and muscles are better when we regularly move. When unwell with COVID people are less active than usual. This can cause aches and pains, stiffness and muscle weakness. Muscle weakness can lead to difficulties with activities such as standing, climbing stairs, gripping objects with your hands or lifting your arms above your head. Some of the treatments that were needed during your COVID illness may have put extra stresses and strains on some of your joints and muscles. These may have caused new or increased joint and muscle problems.

People have told us the most common problems after being unwell with COVID are shoulder and back problems, but joint and muscle problems can occur in any part of the body. Some people have widespread aching that can come and go for a time as you recover. Some people also have odd or altered feelings such as numbness or pins and needles and weakness in the arms or legs.

Shoulder and arm problems after COVID

Some people experience severe shoulder and arm problems after COVID, especially those who have been in hospital. These problems can be a combination of pain, stiffness, numbness in the arms and weakness in some muscles. If you have been given advice or treatment about your arm problem in hospital you should continue to follow that advice. Many of these problems will improve as you get better, but if you have severe problems contact your doctor's surgery to talk to a doctor or physiotherapist.

What can I do about joint and muscle problems?

Many joint and muscle problems after COVID improve quite quickly. Looking after your joints and muscles is a really important part of your recovery. You can do a lot to help your joint and muscle problems by following this advice.

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How do I return to my usual activities after COVID?

You should aim to get back to your usual activities. Try to gradually increase the amount of movement and activity you do. Joints and muscles are designed to move but you need to pace yourself and rest when you need to. Also, take into account any other symptoms you may have, such as fatigue and your breathing. Try to do a bit more each day. Over time you should find you can do more and more.

Is it safe to exercise after COVID?

It is safe to exercise after COVID unless you have been told not to by a health professional, such as a doctor or physiotherapist. Aim for a balance between exercise/activity and rest. At first you may have to rest more frequently. As you improve you should be able to stay more active and do more exercise. Physical activity is generally good for everyone and too much rest can make joint and muscle problems worse. You should gradually increase the amount of the following;

General physical activity; this includes all the activities you usually do. For example, washing and dressing yourself, housework, gardening, hobbies and work. Aim to gradually return to your usual routine by starting with the easier activities and then slowly introducing the more physical ones.

Exercise; Strengthening and flexibility exercises will help your joint and muscle problems.

Flexibility exercises are activities that improve the amount of movement in a joint or muscle. Examples of flexibility activities include;

- Stretching, by moving your joints as far as you can several times a day.
- Yoga
- Tai chi

Strength exercises are any activities that make your muscles work harder than usual. You should try to aim to get back to doing 2 or more sessions of strengthening exercise each week. Examples of muscle-strengthening activities include;

- Climbing stairs
- Lifting weights
- Working with resistance bands
- Gardening activities such as digging
- Walking uphill
- Cycling

Posture

There are no good or bad postures, but it is important to change your position often. Limit the amount of time you stay in one position, such as sitting or looking at tablets and mobile phones. If you find your symptoms are worse in a certain position, find a more comfortable position or move around for a while.

Painkillers

Simple painkillers and creams you can buy at the chemist can help, but you should always ask the pharmacist for advice on what you should use. If you are taking any other tablets or medicines check with the pharmacist or your doctor before taking any new medicines.

When should I contact my GP surgery?

You should seek immediate help from your doctor or physiotherapist if you have severe pain, numbness or weakness in your arms or legs that stops you following the advice on this page.

Contact your GP surgery to talk to a doctor or physiotherapist if;

- Your joint and muscle problems are getting worse.
- You are unable to be active or exercise because of other symptoms such as fatigue or being breathless.
- You develop new symptoms such as pins and needles, worsening weakness in your arms or legs or problems with your balance.
- After 3 months your joint and muscle problems have not improved.

Joint and muscle problems rarely indicate a more serious condition;

- If you get new symptoms of feeling unwell, pain at night that causes problems sleeping or significant joint swelling contact your GP surgery.
- If you get a new hot, red, swollen joint this may be an infection in the joint. This needs urgent treatment so go to accident and emergency on the same day.
- Very rarely back pain with leg pain can affect the nerves that supply your bladder and bowel. This is called Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES). If you get these symptoms you may need urgent treatment and you should go to accident and emergency on the same day.
- For more information see; bit.ly/2RabiWT

More information on how to self-manage your joint and muscle problems is available at csp.org.uk/mskadvice