



# SOME GUIDANCE ON THE RETURN TO EXERCISE AFTER COVID-19

WORDS DENISE PARK

**I** have been asked on numerous occasions about the return to exercise after a positive test for Covid-19, so thought it was appropriate to share this advice.

The medical evidence suggests that the latest Omicron variant appears to spread more easily, but the symptoms can be less severe, with some people exhibiting no symptoms. This has raised the question – ‘Can you continue to train if you have mild or no symptoms?’

Currently, the most frequent reported symptoms for the latest variant tend to be those similar to a bad cold, but could include any of the following:

- Runny nose
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Sneezing
- Sore throat

Background photo © Jacob Adkin

- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Persistent cough
- Hoarse voice
- Chills / shivers
- Fever
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Dizziness / light-headedness
- Brain fog
- Altered / loss of smell
- Eye soreness
- Muscular aches / pain
- Lack of appetite
- Chest pain
- Swollen glands
- Feeling low mentally

If you exhibit any of these symptoms, it is important to have a test as the virus can have serious implications if you continue to exercise whilst having the virus. If you have had a positive test for Covid-19, you need to monitor your return to exercise carefully as doing too much too soon, may at best delay your recovery, and at worst, cause more serious post-viral complications such as myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle) which can, in extreme cases, cause death.

#### MEDICAL RESEARCH CURRENTLY SUGGESTS:

1/ if you have had a **positive test for Covid-19** and exhibit any symptoms, you should have at least 10 days rest from exercise (even when the symptoms are mild), but you must also have 7 symptom-free days before resuming exercise.

This means if you exhibit symptoms for 14 days, you need to add an additional 7 days once symptom-free – giving a total of 21 days rest from any exercise.

2/ if you have had a **positive test for Covid-19** but have no symptoms (asymptomatic) – you should have 7 days rest from exercise as long as you continue to remain symptom-free.

Evidence suggests it frequently takes 3 weeks to recover from the virus, and, particularly as runners, you need to be aware of your:

- resting heart rate - If your normal resting heart rate is 4 or more beats above what is your normal, your heart is still working harder for whatever reason, and you shouldn't really resume exercise. This rule can be applied generally, not just in relation to Covid-19.
- perceived exertion / fatigue.

- altered sleep patterns.
- stress levels.
- muscle soreness.

**Prior to returning to any exercise, you should be able to complete day-to-day activities comfortably and be able to walk 500m on flat ground without any increased fatigue or breathlessness.**

When you have had severe symptoms or have been hospitalised, it would be sensible to seek medical advice for guidance on return to exercise. Equally, if you have any other underlying medical conditions such as diabetes, or heart / kidney disease, it would also be appropriate to seek guidance.

If you continue to feel unwell, you may require further investigations such as an ECG, blood tests, respiratory function tests or renal tests to rule out more serious post-viral complications.

On returning to exercise, it is important to start slowly and gradually increase exercise levels. Do not assume you can simply resume your pre-covid levels of activity. Medical studies have suggested there has been an increase in post-covid musculoskeletal injuries and whilst this was initially thought to be virus-related, it has now been linked to the general lack of fitness and decrease in muscle tone following a prolonged period of rest. It pays to be sensible in your return to activity to help minimise the risk of any further injuries.

Early studies suggest those affected by long-covid need to seriously moderate their rehabilitation. Rather than pushing levels of exercise which cause an increase in fatigue, it is important to restrict exercise to what is possible without exacerbating any symptoms as too much too soon can have massive implications on the overall recovery time. It is far better to walk 200 yards with no reaction and slowly increase exercise tolerance gradually, than to walk one mile which might then require 4 days rest to recover. Slow steps forward rather than one step forwards and then two backwards!

I would hope it goes without saying, that if you have any concerns whatsoever about returning to strenuous activity, you should seek medical advice. Covid-19 may be a virus that we have to learn to live with, so please take heed of the current guidance as long-term post-viral complications can be much more complex to resolve.

*NOTE: Denise Park is a Musculoskeletal Chartered Physiotherapist based in Clitheroe, Lancashire, and is the FRA Accredited Physio. This article aims to help you make an informed decision and be aware of potential treatments that may be available. It is not intended to be a substitute for consulting a medical professional or seeking appropriate medical advice. Whilst information is correct at the time of publication, it must be remembered that medical practice may change in the light of new research and that self-diagnosis may not be accurate.*