

- Virus

What you need to know about returning to life after recovering from Covid-19

The Press · 16 Mar 2022 · 6 · Hannah Martin

If you've just completed or are nearing the end of your seven-day Covid-19 isolation, you might be wondering what comes next.

Do you need to get tested to leave isolation? When can you get back to exercise? What happens if you're re-exposed, or someone in your household later gets Covid-19? Here's what you need to know.

What to do when your seven-day isolation ends

Under the current guidance, you can end isolation after seven days. If you're still sick, stay home until 24 hours after your symptoms resolve, and avoid any high-risk settings while still unwell. You may receive a text message from officials, but don't need to wait for an official message or release to leave isolation.

You do not need to be tested to finish isolation, the Ministry of Health says. If you were tested, the result would likely show as positive – but this does not mean you are infectious.

Your household contacts can complete their isolation at the same time as you, so long as their day 7 test was negative, and they have no new or worsening symptoms. If their tests are positive, they need to begin seven days of isolation as someone with Covid-19.

Testing, isolation and reinfection after Covid-19

After you have recovered from Covid, you won't need to isolate again for three months if someone else in your household tests positive during that time.

This is because the chance of reinfection during this period is low, as people develop immunity following infection.

Post-infection immunity can last months, years, or even a lifetime, depending on the type of illness. For example, once people recover from measles, they're immune for life.

The exact duration of time a person is immune to Covid-19 following infection is still being studied, but initial research suggests protection can last up to six months. This is thought to get weaker over time, waning after two or three months.

It is possible to be reinfected in future.

The Ministry of Health says you should not have a PCR test in the three months following recovery, as you will likely still have a positive result.

Resting, recovery and long Covid

The importance of resting during Covid-19 illness has made headlines recently, as a way to potentially lessen your risk of long Covid (ongoing symptoms following infection).

However, it is not as simple as that, University of Auckland cellular immunologist and long Covid researcher Dr Anna Brooks told Stuff.

Resting does not preclude people from long Covid, and exercising straight after infection will not guarantee a person will trigger long Covid.

The recovery time for Covid is different for everyone, but for most people symptoms will resolve by 12 weeks.

There is little known about what triggers long Covid – it is not linked to the severity of your Covid-19 illness, and often develops after mild or even asymptomatic infection, she said.

Long Covid – estimated to affect 10–30 per cent of cases – is likely triggered by direct viral infection of cells, and indirect unresolved inflammation, she said.

Brooks said resting is critical during and after infection.

She said it was also important to know the signs of an incomplete recovery, most commonly: breathlessness/ cough, fatigue, headaches, a racing heart and general aches and pains.

Children often complain of tiredness, a sore tummy, headaches and aches and pains.

Brooks said this is difficult to quantify, as some people will experience a short, sharp illness and feel 100 per cent again very quickly.

There's no "one-size-fits-all" advice about when to return to exercise either: it comes down to how a person feels in themselves, she said.

Getting vaccinated after infection

If you've had Covid-19, and have not been vaccinated or had your booster, it is recommended you wait a period of time before doing so. You should wait four weeks after recovering from Covid if you need your first, second, or third (for immunocompromised people) dose to complete your vaccination course.

If you are fully vaccinated, but get Covid-19 before getting your booster, it is recommended you wait three months. A longer gap between doses enables the immune system to go through a more robust maturation process.