



# LOOKING AFTER YOUR HEALTH DURING COVID-19: A GUIDE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

**MAY 2020**

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## INTRODUCTION

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This is a short guide for people with severe mental illnesses on practical ways to protect and support physical health during this uncertain and unsettling time. We have worked with experts by experience and clinical professionals to create this resource, and we hope it will be helpful.

We are grateful to NHS England/NHS Improvement for supporting Equally Well UK to produce this vital resource.

Maintaining physical health is now much harder than before, but it has never been more important. Physical activity, stopping smoking and eating a healthy diet can help you feel better emotionally and mentally during this time. Likewise, looking after our mental health makes it a lot easier to take care of our physical health, visit [Rethink Mental Illness for more on Covid-19 and mental health](#). For more information on Covid-19 visit [the Government's guidance](#).

While COVID-19 is dominating our lives, it's easy to neglect other health issues or to feel there isn't help available. While physical health checks might be postponed or adapted, it is still critical that we all continue to address our wider health as usual, making use of resources, such as our GP surgeries and mental health teams to maintain and optimise our health.

This guide is broken down into sections offering some practical ideas and sharing links to resources to help people living with a severe mental illness to look after their physical health within the constraints of the current situation. We have included some key ideas and tips based on existing research and our discussions with experts by experience and professionals.

## SMOKING

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There has never been a better time to stop smoking than now.

Covid-19 is a respiratory virus which affects the lungs and airways. As a result, smoking may increase the risk of a more severe coronavirus infection<sup>1</sup>.

Quitting smoking, by contrast, delivers immediate health benefits, reduces the likelihood of complications from Covid-19 and helps protect others from second-hand smoke. Stopping smoking can also reduce the need for visits to other health services.

*“Never give up trying to give up smoking. Giving up smoking is like catching the crest of a wave, very few people achieve quitting smoking first time around.”*

If you want to quit smoking, speak with your care coordinator if you have one, or your GP. Medication or nicotine replacement therapy on prescription could be a helpful option for your quit attempt. While some GP practices have changed the way, they work at this time, they are still open for business.

If you are on psychiatric medication and plan to stop smoking please speak to your healthcare provider as some medications will need to be reduced if you are no longer smoking. For example, if you are taking clozapine or olanzapine, ideally levels should be checked before and after you stop smoking. It may also be necessary to reduce doses of tricyclic antidepressants (for example, amitriptyline) and benzodiazepines (for example, diazepam or lorazepam) for anyone taking those medicines.

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<sup>1</sup> According to both Public Health England <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/smokers-at-greater-risk-of-severe-respiratory-disease-from-covid-19> and the World Health Organisation <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-on-smoking-and-covid-19>

*“Don’t set unrealistic targets or goals. Get good advice from smoking cessation practitioners or your GP. Be mindful your appetite might increase whilst your body is detoxifying. You might crave sugary or starchy food so surround yourself with healthy snacks like mixed nuts or fruit salad etc. I didn’t find the cravings lasted long and developed alternative habits and hobbies. Find a hobby that you use your hands to help distract. An incentive for me was by reducing smoking I would be able to reduce my medication and improve my health and being able to taste my food as I got my taste buds back. I also saved money through quitting smoking which was a great incentive”*

## Ideas and tips to help with a quit attempt

- **Keeping a diary of how smoking and quitting are making you feel** can provide an outlet for the many different emotions you may experience on the journey of quitting.
- **Building a support network**, for example with friends or family, can be helpful for some people, for instance to help with motivation and to have someone to call if you are struggling.
- **Keeping busy or starting a new hobby/skill** will be important to distract yourself from cravings, which can be stronger if you are feeling bored.
- **If you have a smoking relapse, think of it as a slip-up rather than a failure** – it usually takes several attempts to quit for good.
- **Speak with your GP or healthcare provider**
  - Some psychiatric medication will need to be reduced.
  - Medication or **nicotine replacement therapy on prescription** to help you with your quit attempt.

We know that everyone’s experiences of quitting smoking are different, and what helps you will be unique to you.

## Resources for stopping smoking

[NHS Smokefree](#) gives information on support services to stop smoking.

You can also search for [local stop smoking services](#) which are now offering support for people online or on the phone. You're much more likely to quit successfully with expert support from these services.

Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) have provided [a useful guide with many tips on how to stop smoking](#). ASH also produced a [series of videos made by people with severe mental illness](#) prior to COVID-19 about their experiences of stopping smoking.

The Smoking and Mental Health Partnership has [produced this useful leaflet](#).

Join in and share your stories about quitting smoking, or ask a stop smoking advisor for advice about quitting by tweeting using the hashtag #QuitForCovid. See the [todayistheday](#) website.

## HEALTHY EATING

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Eating a balanced, nutritious diet is important for boosting our immune systems. But with long queues outside supermarkets, and limited online delivery slots, eating healthily can a major challenge.

### If you're having difficulty with shopping or getting food delivered

We know that some people who are having difficulties going shopping are unable to get priority slots for supermarket food deliveries. The NHS volunteer scheme, set up as part of its response to COVID-19, is able to help. If you are having difficulty with getting shopping, medication or essential supplies because of a mental illness, you are eligible to self-refer to the scheme. To make a referral, call 0808 196 3646 or [fill in the online referral form](#).

## Ideas and tips to help with healthy eating

- **The NHS volunteer scheme can help with food shopping** should you need it especially if you have run out of fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables
- **Keep a balanced diet** - limiting sugars and salt and making sure that we are getting enough nutrients
- **Meal prep and batch cooking**
  - This could be a perfect time to start a hobby with cooking healthy meals. Some people have shared how therapeutic they find cooking, finding new recipes and meals
  - If you have a carer, family member or friend who is able to help by cooking healthy meals that you can then freeze speak to them about the types of food you might like to try and if they're able to make them for you
- Try to **keep healthy snacks** in the cupboard like nuts or fruit
- **Avoid or try to limit your coffee and alcohol intake**

## Resources to help healthy eating

The [British Nutrition Foundation](#) has given advice for everyone on how to eat healthily during this time. The World Health Organisation has also shared [advice on healthy eating, with tips on planning meals](#) to avoid waste and the importance of limiting sugar, fat, salt and alcohol intake. It provides a list of foods with high nutritional value which are generally affordable, accessible and have a longer shelf life.

## KEEPING ACTIVE

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The [advantages of regular exercise](#) are well-known. It boosts our mood, self-esteem, sleep quality and energy. It is even more important during this challenging time, to help us stay as well as possible.

If you're self-isolating at the moment because you or someone in your household has symptoms of coronavirus, or if you're defined as extremely vulnerable on medical grounds, you should not leave home. If you feel well enough, you can still do some physical activity indoors to make your day more varied and to get the benefits of exercise.

If you and the people you live with don't have symptoms of coronavirus, you can do one form of exercise outside each day. This might be walking, running or cycling and could be alone, with other people from your household or on a video or phone call.

*“Exercise is still rewarding and also helps to regulate my mood. If I leave it for a week or two then I find that I am in a worse/darker place than I would be with it. Just going for a walk can do wonders for your mood.”*

*“I incorporated physical activity into my life slowly and gradually... It is best to have a specific goal that is achievable. Not achieving goals can create feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction and make you feel bad about yourself. Creating a small goal that is reasonably achievable seems to be better and achieving small goals can be more rewarding than trying to aim for one big goal.”*

### Ideas and tips to help with keeping active

- **Keep realistic expectations** of how much exercise you can do, especially if you are new to exercising. Avoid setting unachievable goals which could make you feel disappointed.
- **You could start with short bursts of exercise**, perhaps 10 minutes each day and build up to longer if you feel able to. Think about seated exercises if you have mobility issues or have not worked out in a while.

- **Don't worry about not having special exercise equipment.** For example, you could use household objects such as tin cans as weights or do step exercises on your stairs if you don't have mobility issues. Also, many exercise videos do not need any equipment at all.
- **Eat nutritious food so you have the energy** you need to exercise and avoid exercising straight after meals.
- **If you have access to a garden, gardening is great for physical and mental health.** Indoors, looking after house plants or growing seeds on a windowsill may help bring you a sense of calm.

## Resources for keeping active

Staying active is more difficult at home for many of us. The World Health Organisation has shared these [tips to keep physically well](#) at this time. They include taking regular active breaks during the day, walking (even indoors) when you can, reducing the amount of time you spend sitting down at a time, and doing online exercise classes.

[Sport England](#) has shared these tips, advice and guidance on how to exercise safely, inside or outside. It includes apps and online content to meet your exercise level, from brisk walking to more intensive exercise.

The NHS has produced [a sitting exercises resource](#) and resources [for people with a physical disability](#).

Arthritis Action have provided a [directory of free online exercise tools and videos](#) with a link to their exercise page too.

If you find a good exercise video or routine for you, try doing it regularly; you can also build up your fitness levels by starting with short bursts of exercise and then extending the amount of time or intensity. It may be hard at first, but gradually over time it becomes easier. People have shared that seeing this change and achieving goals is rewarding and can improve our mental health.



## HEALTHY WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

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Many of us are dealing with heightened emotions more than usual, and we find ourselves cut off from our usual sources of support, such as friends, peers and social activities. As a result, people might need to be more aware of turning to food for comfort. While healthy weight management is much more difficult than normal due to the current restrictions, setting some realistic goals within the Government's social distancing guidelines can be helpful. This might include doing some physical activity, if possible outdoors, each day, or trying to maintain rather than gain weight.

*"It is tempting to overeat when negative emotions take over. I have been focusing on keeping busy to prevent overeating and also been planning meals. I have also been keeping active using a guide from my physio which has helped"*

### Ideas and tips to help with healthy weight management

- **Creating a plan or schedule** ahead of the day might help with healthy weight management, this could include meal plans or set mealtimes, activities or hobbies to help prevent eating through boredom as well as planning a physical activity that works for you
- **Try to avoid comfort eating** where possible, this could be managed by writing down how you are feeling and why and then planning how to manage the feelings. It might also help to talk it through with a friend or family member or focusing on a distraction like a film, book or another hobby.
- **Drink plenty of water** - it can be easy to forget to keep hydrated, some people find it helpful to have a large bottle of water as a reminder and a guide to how much water they have had in a day.
- **Find a physical activity that works for you** and set realistic goals, some days your main physical activity might be as simple as housework, gardening, climbing the stairs if you have them or going for a walk if able to.

## Resources to help manage a healthy weight

[One You](#) is a nationwide programme to support people making simple changes that can have a huge influence on our health, such as eating well, moving more and drinking less alcohol. It includes [home workout videos](#), and a [‘couch to 5K’ app](#).

[Beat, eating disorders charity](#) have a section on their website around coronavirus which includes tips on how to keep working towards recovery during the pandemic

The NHS [weight loss plan](#) is a free 12-week diet and exercise plan designed for adults to help lose weight safely – and keep it off. It includes an online community forum to receive support from a social network.

Many local authorities are now providing online resources to help people to stay well at home. [This resource from Active Norfolk](#), for example, includes tips for people who are vulnerable or disabled.

The [NHS Apps Library](#) has apps and online tools to help manage health and wellbeing.

## MEDICATION AND HEALTH MANAGEMENT

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While COVID-19 is dominating our lives, it’s easy to neglect other health issues or to feel there isn’t help available. While physical health checks might be postponed or adapted, it is still critical that we all continue to address our wider health as usual, making use of resources, such as our GP surgeries and mental health teams to maintain and optimise our health. For more on this please visit NHS guidelines.

If you are already taking medication for existing conditions, the NHS recommends that you continue to do so. The NHS advises to order any repeat prescriptions you have in your usual timeframe. There is no need to order for a longer duration or larger quantities. The NHS website has information about checking if you have to pay for prescriptions.

You might be able to order repeat prescriptions by phone, or online using an app or website if your doctor’s surgery offers this. Your GP or clinical team may move your prescriptions to repeat dispensing arrangements, so you only have to contact your pharmacy to get a repeat of your medicine rather than your GP surgery.

*“While we are under strange times, this doesn’t mean you should stop taking your medication as this may cause withdrawal or relapses. If you have run out of your medication contact your GP, if they are closed contact 111. I was unable to get my normal asthma inhaler due to shortage with the supply however after contacting the GP they were able to recommend a replacement medication.”*

## Ideas and tips to help with medication and health management

- **Check how much medication you have left** to prevent running out
- **Be very careful about buying medication online.** You should only buy from registered pharmacies. You can check if a pharmacy is registered on the General Pharmaceutical Council website.
- If you’re worried about accessing medication, you can contact **NHS 111** in England.
- If you’re in regular contact with **mental health services** (this might be with your support worker, PA, nurse, care worker, therapist, counsellor or befriender) ask about having appointments by phone, text or online.
- **If you are planning to quit smoking, speak to your GP or health care provider** as you may need to reduce your medication.
- **Good quality sleep** can make a big difference to our mental and physical health, Some people find having a sleep schedule can help to improving sleep

## Resources for managing medication and using health services

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has created some [handy resources to support you during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), including:

[Medication and COVID-19](#): Getting your prescription, taking your medication and attending medication appointments during the pandemic

[Remote consultations](#): Many mental health consultations are now happening on the telephone or online because of social distancing measures

[Going to hospital for physical health](#): What to do if you or someone you are caring for needs to go to hospital because of a physical illness or injury

Rethink Mental Illness has written [advice on the impact of coronavirus for people who require blood tests when taking Clozapine](#).

## FINANCIAL WELLBEING

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Financial wellbeing is closely linked to mental and physical health. Getting the money you're entitled to has never been more important, and recent changes to the benefits system have aimed to make that easier and quicker. To find out more go to the [Money and Mental Health advice for Covid-19 page](#) or [money and mental health](#) main page where they offer specialist advice. Money Savings Expert also have broader [advice around debt and support](#).

*“I am spending a lot more time at home which results in spending more on my gas and electricity bills. So I created a financial plan and got in touch with my energy providers to have an honest conversation with them about my situation and was able to get better annual deal with some providers and have a reduction in my payments during this period for others reducing my monthly costs.”*

## Ideas and tips to help financial wellbeing

- **Create a financial planner**, if you are not able to speak to a trusted friend or family member about supporting you with this. Money and Mental Health advice also have a budgeting planner on their website.
- **Speak to your utility providers** i.e energy, gas or phone or any other outgoing payments, to see if they can help with differing or reducing payments or providing a better deal to reducing your outgoing costs, this can be crucial if you are on pay as you go and might need to go to top up your card.
- **Check your benefit entitlements**, find out if you are entitled to any additional benefits at this time. Money and Mental Health Advice provide information on benefits.

## EXPERIENCING AND RECOVERING FROM COVID-19

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If you are having, or have recently had, symptoms of Covid-19, it is important to seek help from your GP if you need it.

If you have had the Covid-19 virus, you may continue to experience some symptoms of fatigue and breathlessness, especially if you have had a more severe experience and needed treatment in hospital. This may make it even more difficult to look after your health, at least in the short-term. But stopping smoking, eating as healthily as possible and doing some physical activity will all help you to recover.

## Ideas and tips to help when experiencing or recovering from Covid-19

- You may want to make an advance statement with your wishes and preferences should you become unwell and find it difficult to make decisions for yourself. While it isn't legally binding, it tells health professionals how you would like to be treated. If you have a care coordinator or someone working with you regularly, they may have access to a local document template you could use. **[Bipolar UK also provides guidance](#)** on how to do this.

- If you are worried about coronavirus, make sure you receive reliable information from the NHS or your GP as there are a number of myths around Covid-19. You might also want to consider limiting the time you spend watching or listening to coverage about the outbreak including on social media.

## Helpful resources and support services

If you have concerns about your mental or physical health, including any existing medical conditions or new problems, **the NHS is open for business**. While some GP surgeries and hospitals have changed the way they work at this time, it is vital to seek help for a health problem in the same way as normal.

The **NHS 111** service is available for any non-urgent calls and the [NHS UK website](#) provides up-to-date information and advice on a wide range of medical matters and how to seek help if you need it.

Public Health England has produced a guide to [looking after mental health while staying at home as part of its Every Mind Matters campaign](#) (please note this has been created for the whole population, not specifically for people with severe mental illness).

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists has posted a [helpful top tips guide to looking after your health at this time](#).

[Rethink Mental Illness](#) provides a wide range of help and support, including a dedicated [money and mental health advice service](#).

[Anxiety UK provides support and advice](#) for people living with **anxiety**, including an information line, online chat, peer support and access to therapy.

[The British and Irish Group for the Study of Personality Disorder \(BIGSPD\)](#) have collected resources which may be helpful for people living with a personality disorder diagnosis during COVID-19.

Being safe at home is also crucial. [The Government have a helpful webpage](#) for if you or someone you know is experiencing **domestic abuse**. [If you need urgent assistance but cannot speak to an operator, you are advised to dial 999, and once through press 55](#).

If you are worried that you are drinking too much or have a dependency on **alcohol**, the [NHS website includes useful tips and guidance on safe levels of consumption](#). The NHS also

[provides advice for anyone experiencing addiction to drugs](#), including the treatment you're entitled to if you need it. [Mind has also produced a useful guide](#) on this topic.

Bipolar UK have written some [specific guidance for people with bipolar disorder](#), including 5 top tips.

BEAT runs a [chat room called the Sanctuary](#) for people with **eating disorders** and has useful [advice on its website on Covid-19](#).

## Easy read guides

The Government has produced two easy read guides to looking after your health at this time:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) [Looking after your feelings and your body](#)

Guidance [for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus](#) (COVID-19)

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## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND CRISIS CONTACTS

Maintaining physical health is also closely linked to mental health. It's also more difficult to stay well mentally at this time, so taking steps to look after mental health is more important than ever.

For more information from the Government about maintaining your mental health during COVID-19 [visit their website](#).

### If you're in crisis and need to speak to someone

- If you are in a crisis or **immediate danger**, please call **999**
- **Call NHS 111** (for when you need help but are not in immediate danger)
- **Contact your GP** and ask for an emergency appointment
- **Contact the Samaritans** who are available 24 hours a day, by phone (free for UK and Ireland) 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org).

For more advice and helplines please visit the [Helpline Partnership](#).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are grateful to NHS England/NHS Improvement for supporting Equally Well UK to produce this resource.

This resource has involved engagement with members of the Equally Well Expert by Experience Group, Clinical Group and member organisations.

The resource was created by Emma Bailey, Andy Bell, Androulla Harris and Alethea Joshi from Centre for Mental Health. We are grateful to all who shared their input and advice for this resource: Wendy Burn Clinical Group Chair, Jonathan Bickford Clinical Group member representing RCGP, Tim Coupland Clinical Group member representing RCN, Gabriella Hasham at Rethink Mental Illness, Kevin James Expert by Experience member, Barry Lloyd from Rethink Mental Illness, Marsha McAdam Expert by Experience member, Beth McGeever at NHSE/I, Jay Nairn at NHSE/I, Karen Peach Expert by Experience member, Emily Peckham from Closing the Gap, Vicky Salt from ASH, David Shiers Carer and GP.

## ABOUT US

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[Equally Well UK](#) is hosted by Centre for Mental Health and is a collaboration with Rethink Mental Illness who convene our Expert by Experience Group, a Clinical Group whose members include representatives from Medical Royal Colleges, Royal Societies and other healthcare professional bodies, and more than 50 member organisations across the UK. All Equally Well member organisations have signed the Charter for Equal Health and committed to improving physical health support for people with a mental illness.

Everything Equally Well does is coproduced by people who are experts by experience and by profession.

The Equally Well website will also continue to have links to the [latest resources on mental and physical health during COVID-19](#). We will continue to update the resources so please check our Covid webpage for the latest version.