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# Health Considerations for Returning to Sport during Covid-19

## Is it safe to exercise during the coronavirus pandemic? Does exercising increase your risk of infection?

**Exercise is important and individuals should be encouraged to exercise provided they are well and asymptomatic.** There is evidence that moderate exercise performed for 20–30 min 3–4 times per week may strengthen the immune system and reduce the risk of viral infection. Exercise or training needs to be adjusted based on public health advice and restrictions. Outdoor activities are always preferable as the risk of transmission is reduced. The benefits of exercise outdoors are multifold, you are more likely to have higher Vitamin D levels which appears to be protective against significant COVID-19 infection. If training in a group one must be mindful that with more vigorous exercise the area of spread of respiratory droplets is greater and so a larger area should be allowed between participants where possible and in keeping with public health advice.

**Regular moderate exercise is beneficial and will reduce your risk of getting infection.**



Although regular moderate exercise is beneficial for the immune system, there are suggestions that regular, high intensity exercise, especially if you are not used to a higher intensity, can increase your risk of a viral infection. When returning to exercise you should not exceed your usual training programme. **When returning it is important to avoid sudden increases in training load as these can weaken your immune system, as well as increased risk of musculoskeletal injury.**

For example if you are used to running 5km once a week, but have taken a few weeks off due to illness or due to inactivity incurred as a result of restrictions, then it is advisable to gradually increase your distance up to 5km over a few weeks.



**Exercising outdoors increases your Vitamin D levels. People with high Vitamin D levels appear to have less severe Covid-19 illness.**

## I was diagnosed with COVID, is it safe to return to sport/exercise?

It must be stressed that it is always advised that athletes do not train/exercise when ill. This is because

- further exercise can weaken an already over run immune system and make the infection more severe
- potential development of heart complications
- risk of spread of infection

We are aware that 80% of COVID-19 infections are mild and self limiting. However, in a small proportion of cases there is an apparent heightened risk of further deterioration later in the illness (around day 9) leading to worse chest infection and requirement for more intensive medical care. This makes COVID-19 unique from other viral illnesses.

If one contracts COVID-19 it is advised to take a more prolonged period of rest and gradual return to play. At least  $\geq 10$  days from onset of symptoms plus 7 days from symptom resolution. In the instance where COVID-19 is suspected but not confirmed this approach should also be taken.



**If you had Covid-19 you should take a more gradual approach to return to exercise. At least  $\geq 10$  days from onset of symptoms plus 7 days from symptom resolution. If you had a severe illness, (i.e. you were hospitalised), you should consult with your gp/ physician prior to returning to sport.**

If a person was hospitalised or had severe illness due to suspected or confirmed COVID-19 it is recommended that before returning back to sport or exercise after prolonged abstinence they should undergo a comprehensive clinical assessment with their physician/general practitioner.

## Are athletes with asthma at higher risk of contracting COVID-19?

Respiratory illness and in particular exercise induced asthma are common in many athletes, notably endurance athletes. It is important athletes optimise management of their asthma through their physician/gp. **If an athlete has asthma which is well controlled they do not appear to be at higher risk of getting the virus.** It is important that this group continue to take care to avoid respiratory irritants such as air pollution or heavily chlorinated pools.



These recommendations were devised by Dr Jim O'Donovan, Dr Rod McLoughlin, Dr Alan Byrne and Dr Deirdre Ward, Consultant Cardiologist, Tallaght University Hospital

In conjunction with the Expert Advisory Group on Return to Sport [EAG Return to Sport](#)



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