

Restoring lungs

Illnesses like COVID-19 and RSV can take a toll, but providers have a roadmap to get you breathing better

Humans are well-equipped to bounce back from most cases of respiratory illnesses like COVID-19, RSV and the flu. But in some cases, the impact on your lungs can be long-lasting, leading to chronic symptoms like difficulty breathing, fatigue or brain fog. You can also be at a higher risk for a blood clot or infection in your lungs.

"There's damage to the lungs in the form of cellular damage, as well as immune system dysregulation and prolonged inflammation," says [Yiran Gong, MD](#), a pulmonologist at OSF HealthCare. "These can be the drivers of post-COVID syndrome, or extensive and persistent symptoms after the resolution of the viral illness."

Dr. Gong admits the outlook can be daunting. But health care providers have several ways to attack the problem.

Pulmonary rehabilitation involves breathing exercises to "retrain your body on how to breathe," Dr. Gong says. For people with post COVID-asthma, a provider may prescribe an inhaler to reduce inflammation in the lungs' small airways.

"There are medications to slow the progression of pulmonary fibrosis [scarring]. However, these medications have not really been researched for COVID specifically just because of how short of a time COVID has been around," Dr. Gong says. "People who do have extensive lung scarring will require referral to a transplant center."

Staying on top of your health, such as being up to date on vaccines and practicing good hygiene (like washing your hands thoroughly and often), is a good way to avoid the illnesses that cause lung issues. But if you are dealing with chronic lung symptoms, Dr. Gong says you shouldn't lose hope.

"See a physician. Make sure there's not an underlying cause that hasn't been treated," he says. "Then you'll work on optimizing lung function. Take it one step at a time."

Read more about how to keep your lungs in top shape on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).