

Long COVID: Brain fog and communication

Changes to cognition and thinking have been widely reported in people with long COVID and is often referred to as “brain fog”.



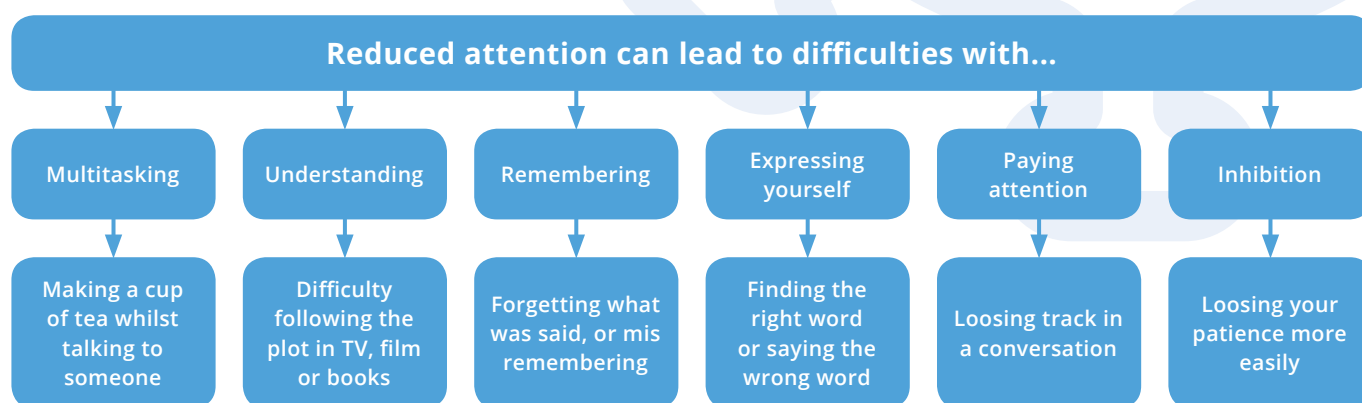
What is brain fog?

‘Brain fog’ can affect your ability to think and reason, including the ability to concentrate, process information, understand, remember, learn, and speak or write. It might be difficult to filter unimportant things out, such as background noise or people walking past; they might feel more distracting than usual. You may also find yourself feeling overly sensitive to your surroundings e.g. bright light or loud noises. The reduced ability to focus can then have an impact on other thinking skills, such as understanding, remembering the conversation, and expressing yourself.

What causes brain fog?

We commonly see cognitive difficulties alongside other diseases or changes to the body; infections, menopause, depression, and chronic pain can all result in these difficulties with thinking. Whilst we are not yet certain of the mechanisms in long COVID, there is some evidence that it may be due to a prolonged inflammatory response and dysregulation of the body systems following COVID-19 infection. The current understanding is that brain fog will fluctuate, but can improve over time with careful management of physical, cognitive and psychological symptoms.

How brain fog can impact on communication



Managing the language difficulties associated with brain fog

People have reported a variety of language difficulties including; word finding, fluency, reading comprehension and writing difficulties. Cognitive and physical fatigue may impact on our attention and concentration. This might affect how easy it is to find the right word, and plan what you want to say. You might find yourself saying similar sounding or similar meaning words by accident. **Here are some strategies to help reduce these difficulties:**

- Explain your difficulties to others, this might help to reduce your anxiety around speaking which can make symptoms worse.
- Try to avoid drawing attention to a word finding difficulty, this may cause you to lose track of what you were saying and disrupt the flow of conversation.
- Try giving a description, this might help you retrieve your target word and will also allow your listener to take an educated guess.
- Remember word finding difficulties happen to everyone, try to avoid focusing on the times it doesn't go well but also focus on the times it does.
- Sometimes a different word will work just as well (e.g. 'moggy' for 'cat').
- Take your time, pacing your speech will give you extra planning time.
- Can you demonstrate the word nonverbally? Mime and pointing can be really effective alternatives when struggling for a word.
- If tiredness is impacting on your speech, consider planning important calls and meetings for times when you are typically at your best e.g. write down key words before making a telephone call.

If you lose track of what you are saying:

- **Summarise what you think you last said**, e.g. 'I was telling you about when Mary came to visit?'
- **Restate the topic** if you feel that things are 'drifting' e.g. 'Going back to lunch time, I was telling you what I ate?'
- **Write some questions down**, presenting them one at a time will allow you time to think about each one.

How can I manage brain fog?

Change how you do the "thinking activity":



Try to concentrate on just one activity at a time, for only a short time. For example, if reading and remembering is difficult, decide to focus on it quietly for 5 minutes then have a break for 10 minutes. Notice if other changes help, perhaps reading aloud helps with concentration and remembering, or making a short note afterwards. Slowly, you will hopefully be able to build up over time.

Change the place:



Try to notice if background noise, bright lights or a busy space feel distracting from thinking, concentrating and understanding.

Managing emotions:



Any emotion affects how the brain works. Feeling stressed, worried or low can make it harder to concentrate, remember or process information. Try to think about what helps you feel calmer and more relaxed - e.g. connecting with other people, being in a warm or comfortable place, scented candles / essential oils or gentle music. Seek further help if needed via your GP.

Managing physical health:



When unwell or in pain, our brains focus on these sensations rather than thinking clearly. Look to other resources, such as NHS "Living with long COVID" website to help with good sleep, gentle movement, pain management and balanced diet to help your body and brain work as effectively as it can. Your GP might be able to refer you to a long COVID service to help with this.

Speak to your GP if your brain fog is not improving, if it is affecting your day to day life or you are worried about your symptoms.