

Monitoring your COVID-19 symptoms at home

You may test positive for COVID-19. There is a possibility that you may develop symptoms from this illness, if you haven't already. In some cases, people need to be admitted to the hospital for the treatment of this virus. Please seek medical attention if you are concerned about your symptoms.

If you have general questions about your COVID-19 diagnosis and the care that you may require, visit nshealth.ca/i-have-tested-positive

Is there a tool that can help me manage my COVID-19 symptoms at home?

Many people across Nova Scotia are managing their COVID-19 symptoms at home by monitoring their breathing. Low oxygen levels in your blood can be a predictor of when you need to go to hospital. A pulse oximeter is a simple device that is placed over the finger or toe and measures the amount of oxygen in your blood. This information can help you understand when to seek medical care.

Depending on the levels from your pulse oximeter, you may need to continue to monitor at home, or you may need to seek additional care. See the table below to see what to do.

Where can I find a pulse oximeter?

You may borrow a pulse oximeter from a limited supply at your local COVID-19 testing centre. For more information on testing locations, please visit nshealth.ca/visit-covid-19-testing-site. You can also purchase your own pulse oximeter which may be available at your local pharmacy or online.

Who do I contact if I have questions on how to use the pulse oximeter?

Please contact 811 for additional questions.

How do I return the pulse oximeter?

You will likely not need the pulse oximeter after you recover from COVID-19.

You are considered recovered when you are no longer infectious for COVID-19. Typically, this is:

- 7 full days after symptoms have started OR after you had a positive test, if you had no symptoms.
- AND symptoms have been improving for at least 24 hours (or 48 hours if you have gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea or vomiting) and you don't have a fever.

Some individuals may continue to have a lingering cough, particularly if they are prone to chronic cough. However, if they meet the criteria above, they are no longer infectious.

When you are recovered, please return to your local COVID-19 testing centre (nshealth.ca/visit-covid-19-testing-site) or community library (except for Cumberland County).



When should I call for medical attention?

Call for medical attention if you have any of the symptoms listed below, or if you are concerned about your symptoms. **Take two readings at least 5 minutes apart for best results.**

Oxygen Level	Symptoms	What do I do?
92% or higher	AND at least one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shortness of breath that is quickly getting worse.• Struggling (working hard) to breathe.• New chest pain.• New trouble doing daily tasks (like getting dressed, using the washroom).• Respiratory rate over 30 breaths a minute, after resting for at least 5 minutes.	Call your primary health care provider (usual doctor or nurse practitioner) or 811.
85-91%	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unable to complete simple tasks due to shortness of breath• Shortness of breath at rest• Restlessness/dizziness/headache• Constant cough that "takes your breath away"• "Wheezing" when breathing	Go to the nearest Emergency Department right away
Less than 85%	Symptoms above AND/OR you are not able to breathe	Call 911 right away

How to monitor yourself at home with a pulse oximeter

COVID-19 can cause problems with your lungs, so it is important to monitor your oxygen levels. This device measures the amount of oxygen in your blood. Beams of light from the device pass through the blood in your finger (or toe) to measure your oxygen levels. You will not feel this happen. The beams of light are “read” to calculate the percentage of your blood that is carrying oxygen. It also provides a reading of your heart rate (pulse).

To make sure the oximeter is giving you a good reading, count your pulse for one minute (see to the right how to count your resting pulse rate) and compare the number you get to the pulse number on the oximeter. If they are the same, you are getting a good signal.

Check your vital signs at least 2 times a day, or more often if you feel that your symptoms are getting worse. To do this, count your:

- Resting respiratory rate – how many times you breath a minute. One full breath in and out = 1
- Resting pulse rate - number of beats per minute (bpm)
- Oxygen saturation – percentage of oxygen in your blood (using the pulse oximeter)

Keep a record of the measurements to talk about with your health care provider.

Try to avoid the following, which may affect your oxygen level readings:

- Nail polish or dark pigment on the finger being used
- Direct, bright light shining on the device
- Moving while the device is on your finger
- Using the pulse oximeter while sleeping

Follow these instructions to check your vital signs

Resting Respiratory Rate:

1. Sit comfortably in a seated position with your feet resting on the floor. Stay in this position for at least 5 minutes before starting to count your respiratory rate.
2. To count your respiratory rate, notice the natural rise (breathing in) and fall (breathing out) of your chest as you breathe. One full breath includes one chest rise (breath in) and one chest fall (breath out).
3. Set a timer for 1 minute. Count the number of full breaths.

The average respiratory rate for an adult is 12 to 20 breaths a minute.

Resting Pulse Rate (count beats per minute):

Feel for your pulse or have a friend or family member find your pulse. It's easy to check your pulse using just your fingers, either at the wrist or the side of the neck.

1. On the neck, place your index and middle fingers on either side of your windpipe.
2. At the wrist, lightly press the index and middle fingers of one hand on the opposite wrist, just below the base of the thumb.
3. Place two fingers (pointer and index fingers) lightly over the wrist until you can feel the heartbeat.
4. Count the number of times you feel the heartbeat. It is best to do this in a quiet area with the least amount of distraction. You can count the number of times the heart beats in 10 seconds and then multiply that by 6.

A normal resting heart rate is between 60 and 100 beats per minute.

Oxygen Saturation (using the pulse oximeter):

1. Sit comfortably in a seated position with your feet resting on the floor. Stay in this position for at least 5 minutes before measuring your oxygen saturation.
2. The best reading is when your hand (or foot) is warm and relaxed (not moving).
3. Place your index (pointer), middle, ring finger **OR** toe in the device with your fingernail facing up. Make sure the red light inside the probe lines up with your clean, natural, non-bruised fingernail (or toenail).
4. Press the “On” button to turn the pulse oximeter on. The device will calculate your oxygen saturation level. The reading will be displayed on the screen after several seconds.
5. The first number is your oxygen saturation (“SpO2%”). The second number is your pulse rate (“PR bpm”). If you are getting a good reading, you will see the line below the numbers go up and down with each heartbeat. “Normal” SpO2 is between 95-100%, except for those with underlying health conditions/chronic lung disease/COPD.