

The many mysteries of 'Long Covid'

CHELSEA CIRRUZZO

Even as more people get vaccinated and the world inches back toward normalcy, "Long Covid" isn't going away anytime soon. The post-Covid condition, recognized by the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the US, is defined by a wide-range of symptoms of illness weeks or months after an initial coronavirus infection. In the past year, research has grown in this area and patients with Long Covid have formed support groups and lobbied on Capitol Hill for answers and funding for more research.

What is Long Covid?

Long Covid is a condition that occurs when individuals sickened by Covid-19 don't recover fully after a few weeks or manage to recover, only to have symptoms reappear weeks or months later. It can affect anyone who has had Covid, even if they had mild or no symptoms.

But what that actually looks like for a person can vary. The CDC lists a wide range of symptoms that include: tiredness or fatigue; difficulty thinking or concentrating (sometimes referred to as "brain fog"); headache; loss of smell or taste; dizziness on standing; fast-beating or pounding heart (also known as heart palpitations); chest pain; difficulty breathing or shortness of breath; cough; joint or muscle pain; depression or anxiety; fever; symptoms that get worse after physical or mental activities

Who are the Long-haulers?

It's not yet clear what makes someone develop Long Covid, but there is some emerging research. A study published in March in the journal *Nature Medicine* looked at self-reported symptoms among 4,182 cases of Covid-19. Nearly 560 people, or 13 percent, reported symptoms lasting 28 days or more. The presence of persistent symptoms beyond 28 days was significantly associated with increasing age and disproportionately seen among women, except those 70 and older. Having more than five symptoms during the first week of Covid-19 illness was associated with the prolonged condition, and the first-week symptoms 'most predictive' of Long Covid were fatigue, headache, shortness of breath, hoarse voice and muscle pain.

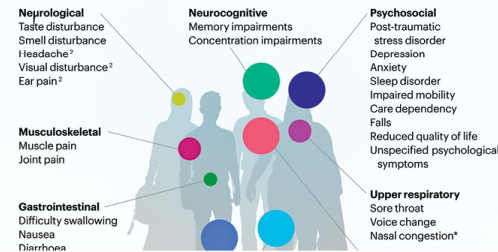
In March, researchers funded by the NIH published a preprint paper, a paper that hasn't been peer reviewed, examining more than 1,400 health records from the University of California Covid Research Data Set. It found that 27 percent of patients reported persistent symptoms after 60 days and women were more likely to become long-haulers. Of those who developed Long COVID, 32 percent initially had asymptomatic infections.

Top health officials have noted similarities between Long Covid and Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or ME/CFS. The syndrome is defined by a chronic and debilitating post-exertional malaise – worsen-

ing fatigue after even minimal activity. Some long-haulers have also been diagnosed with ME/CFS.

John Brooks, Chief Medical Officer for the CDC's Covid-19 response, has observed the links between the diseases but has cautioned against calling them the same condition, noting there are some differences between the two. Brooks told *US News* that many ME/CFS patients can't pin down the initial infection that made them sick, unlike Long Covid patients. Additionally, he said, some Long Covid patients have pulmonary and cardiac symptoms not typically seen in ME/CFS.

Long Covid symptoms



By studying Long Covid, NIH and CDC officials say they hope more can be learned about ME/CFS, too. More than 33 million Amer-

icans have become infected with Covid-19 since the start of the pandemic.

Recent months have yielded emerging and potentially enlightening research into the Long Covid phenomenon. A February study published by researchers from the University of Washington found that approximately 30 percent of 177 people who had Covid-19 and were followed for as long as nine months later reported 'persistent' symptoms. Among 150 outpatients who were never hospitalized for Covid-19, about one-third reported persistent symptoms. Researchers said their findings indicate "the health consequences of Covid-19 extend far beyond acute infection, even among those who experience mild illness."

Can Covid-19 vaccines help?

Some long-haulers have said getting a Covid-19 vaccine has relieved some symptoms, but it's too soon to tell whether this is an effective treatment. One support group, called Survivors Corps, has documented numerous members who say vaccines



have helped their symptoms, prompting Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale University, to launch a study examining the impact of vaccines on Long Covid. However, some long-haulers have reported feeling worse after getting a vaccine, underscoring a need to study the phenomenon.

Long Covid clinics have cropped up around the world to provide comprehensive care to people with Long Covid. Some clinics are part of larger hospital systems and refer patients to a number of specialists, including neurological, behavioural, pulmonary and physical therapy specialists. Survivors Corps keeps a list of such clinics. However, some clinics require patients to have Positive Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) or antibody tests, or a referral from another provider. Some Long Covid patients have expressed frustration that such clinics may require patients to have received a test showing previous infection as some say they were unable to access a test at the time.

The US CDC is finalizing guidance for providers on how to identify and manage

Long Covid in patients. The guidance was developed with input by a number of experts at the CDC and within the health care industry, with collaboration from the American College of Physicians, the American Academy of Family Medicine, the American Academy of Pediatrics and others.

A CDC official told *US News* that the guidance is expected to include: how to identify Long Covid; considerations for clinical evaluation and recommend tests; case management, including post-Covid clinical referral where appropriate; and an emphasis on the importance of patient support groups.

Meanwhile, a survey of half a million adults in England suggests around two million people may have had some long-lasting symptoms (Long Covid) after having coronavirus. The React study shows about a third of people who report they have coronavirus symptoms have one or more symptoms that persist for at least 12 weeks. Long Covid is an emerging phenomenon that is not yet fully understood, and there is no universally-agreed definition.

(*US News, BBC*)