

LONG COVID: What You Need to Know



What is long COVID?

Long COVID is the overall term for a wide range of symptoms that are present for at least 3 months after a person has a COVID-19 infection. It can affect anyone who has had COVID-19, even if their infection was mild or did not cause symptoms. Some people have long COVID symptoms right after their initial illness. In other cases, symptoms do not appear or get worse until weeks later.

Long COVID symptoms can last for weeks, months or years after SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) goes away. It can affect multiple organs and body systems, including the heart, lungs, brain and digestive system.

Staying up to date on COVID-19 vaccination is the best way to reduce the risk of long COVID. Evidence shows that people who are fully vaccinated are less likely to have severe COVID-19 illness. This means they have a lower risk of developing long COVID.

Do you have concerns about long COVID? Talk to your family doctor. They can help you understand your risk and make an informed decision about getting vaccinated.

Who can get long COVID?

Anyone who has had a COVID-19 infection can develop long COVID. This includes:

- People who had mild symptoms or no symptoms during their initial infection
- People who experienced severe illness or were hospitalized due to COVID-19

KEY FACT: Long COVID can affect people of all ages, including children.

What are common symptoms of long COVID?

People who have long COVID can experience a wide range of different symptoms that may interfere with daily life. The symptoms may come and go over time. They often cycle between improving and getting worse.

Common symptoms of long COVID include the following:

- **Fatigue** – Extreme tiredness that makes it hard to do everyday activities
- **Post-exertional malaise (also called PEM)** – Fatigue and other symptoms that get worse after physical or mental activity and can last for days or weeks
- **Cognitive issues** – Brain fog, difficulty concentrating, memory problems
- **Breathing and heart problems** – Shortness of breath, cough, chest pain, heart palpitations (rapid, pounding or fluttering heartbeat)
- **Pain** – Muscle aches, joint pain, headaches, abdominal (stomach) pain
- **Other symptoms** – Loss of taste or smell, mood changes, sleep problems, skin rashes, menstrual cycle changes

Symptoms of long COVID may last for weeks, months or years after a person has fully recovered from active COVID-19 illness. They often appear or get worse after activity.

How is long COVID diagnosed?

There is no single test to diagnose long COVID. Your family doctor will diagnose this condition based on the following:

- Patient history of COVID-19 infection
- Documentation and assessment of ongoing symptoms

Your doctor may order certain tests to help rule out other conditions and assess how severe your symptoms are. These may include cognitive function tests, blood tests and imaging studies.

How is long COVID managed?

Currently, there is no cure for long COVID. Your doctor's goal is to help you manage long COVID symptoms to improve your quality of life and ability to function. Family doctors address each patient's specific long COVID symptoms by designing an individualized management plan. The plan may include self-care strategies and care from your doctor and other health care professionals.

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

- **Breathing exercises** to improve lung function
- **Energy conservation techniques** such as pacing, planning and prioritizing activities to avoid making fatigue worse
- **Olfactory training** to help recover the sense of taste and smell

MULTIDISCIPLINARY CARE

- Your family doctor may refer you to one or more subspecialists to address specific long COVID symptoms. These may include a pulmonologist, cardiologist, neurologist or mental health professional.
- Rehabilitation programs can help people with long COVID manage their physical and cognitive symptoms. They can be especially helpful for people who have severe long-term effects.

When should I seek medical help for long COVID?

It is important to talk to your family doctor if long COVID is affecting your quality of life or if you have new or worsening symptoms.

Seek medical help right away if you experience any of the following:

- Severe chest pain, heart palpitations or difficulty breathing
- Intense cognitive problems, such as memory loss or confusion
- Mental health challenges, such as persistent anxiety, depression or trouble managing stress
- Worsening fatigue or inability to do everyday activities

Additional Long COVID Resources

Get more information and ongoing updates about long COVID from the following organizations:

- American Academy of Family Physicians aafp.org/longcovid
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/covid/long-term-effects
- Department of Health and Human Services www.covid.gov/be-informed/longcovid
- RECOVER Initiative from the National Institutes of Health recovercovid.org