

Life After COVID-19

For those who have tested positive for COVID-19, the experience can be harrowing, even if you may not actually exhibit any symptoms. First of all, there is the fear and anxiety of whether it is going to be a full blown illness with hospitalisation and complications. Then there is the whole quarantine rigmarole and all the inconveniences and troubles this brings. Not to mention the worry for our loved ones whom we may have passed it on to.

And as if the actual illness itself were not enough to contend with, it appears too that for some, the ravages of COVID-19 does not end even after they are considered “recovered”.

While some are lucky enough to escape without any symptoms, there is an increasing number who experience varying symptoms for weeks and even months afterwards. These post-COVID-19 long-term symptoms are what the medical fraternity is now calling “Long COVID”.

Let’s have a look at some of the issues we understand about this post-COVID condition.

1. What is long COVID-19?

As it is still a relatively new phenomenon, there is no clear definition of what actually constitutes long COVID-19 as yet. This is mainly because COVID-19 affects each patient differently. Patients range from those who are totally asymptomatic to those who spend weeks in the ICU on ventilators, so the actual period of illness is undetermined.

The general consensus is that symptoms that persist for longer than four weeks are considered long COVID-19 or chronic post-COVID-19 sequelae. It can also, unfortunately, affect those who are symptomless to start with.

2. What is the cause?

Post-illness inflammation or immune response is one of the main contributing causes.

3. What are the symptoms?

The list of complaints is quite extensive, with a Stanford study documenting 84 post-COVID-19 clinical symptoms. One of the most prevalent lingering symptoms is chronic fatigue. This is not quite the normal everyday tiredness and but has been described in the superlative as “feeling battered”, “exhausted”, and “bone-weary”. Non-restorative sleep adds to the problem, and physical exertion exacerbates the symptoms.

Other complaints include breathlessness, lack of concentration, headache, loss of smell and taste, dizziness, palpitations and even anxiety and depression, among others. More severe post-COVID-19 health issues are damage to the heart, lung and brain, as well as multi-system inflammatory syndrome, all of which can cause long term health challenges.

4. How long does it last?

With the exception of those who fall seriously ill, most people who contract COVID-19 recover within two to three weeks. Patients have reported Post-COVID-19 symptoms 6 months to a year after recovery, and some even claim that they “have never had a day without symptoms ever since”.

5. Who gets long COVID-19?

While long COVID-19 appears to be more prevalent in older patients or those who were seriously ill, younger patients and even children have reported various persisting symptoms long after the initial recovery. Unfortunately, there is no foolproof way to guess who will face these issues.

6. What is the treatment?

It all depends on the type of symptoms and condition of the patient. COVID-19 is a viral infection, and viral infections are usually treated symptomatically. So it is with symptoms of long COVID. Firstly, any comorbidity should be managed accordingly. Then, further workup is necessary to check whether there are sequelae involving major organs such as the heart and lung. Subsequently, symptoms are treated medically and/or with rehabilitation.

Live well and look ahead

Here are 11 useful tips and recommendations to build up your health and immunity after a COVID-19 infection.

1. A healthy diet

Proper nutrition comprising healthy, wholesome foods and reduced carbohydrate, fat and sugar intake are crucial in recovering from any illness. What you feed your body is what it will use as building blocks to restore energy, cells and your immune system.

2. Drink enough water

Clean, pure water is the best hydration you can give your body. Enjoy that cup of coffee or afternoon tea, but ensure that you get at least 8 glasses of water a day to flush out toxins unless advised otherwise by your doctor.

3. Regular exercise

After days of lying in bed recovering, it is time to move. Every little bit counts, and even if you are plagued by post-COVID-19 fatigue, you can start breathing exercises to strengthen your lungs after checking with your doctor. Eventually, light exercises such as walking would be good to start you on your way to fitness once again. However, be aware of your body, and if you are breathless, stop.

4. A positive state of mind

Emotional and mental well-being is crucial in these times of COVID-19 and necessary to lead us out of the doldrums we have been in. Find a productive and enjoyable hobby that relaxes you and gives you good vibes. Add to this an attitude of gratitude that you are alive and have pulled through and look with hope towards a better tomorrow.

5. Spend time outdoors

A good dose of Vitamin D, the warmth of the sun on your face and the calming flora and fauna of the natural world can do wonders for your psyche. Have breakfast on your balcony or patio, open up doors and windows for fresh air flow and sunshine.

6. Ensure proper rest and sleep

It is crucial to get enough rest to allow yourself to heal. Listen to the dictates of your body and make sure that you have a conducive environment to rest and get 7-9 hours of sleep every night. Conserve energy wherever possible and do not undertake strenuous tasks or exercises (you probably wouldn’t be up to it anyway). Take it easy and give yourself time.

7. Maintain good relationships

The support and presence (where possible) of family and loved ones is invaluable towards emotional wellness. Human beings are social creatures, and we wither without close relationships. While current situations prevent us from spending time together, stay in touch, talk, share and laugh through technology. All these would contribute towards mental wellness that is pivotal to physical wellness.

8. Maintain good mental health

Any illness can make you sluggish, and COVID-19 especially is associated with brain fog and lack of concentration. Train your brain with mentally stimulating activities such as Sudoku, jigsaw puzzles, memory games, and yes, video games too, if that is your cup of tea. (Note: Watching K-dramas, C-dramas and J-dramas do not count, although they are very enjoyable and addictive!).

9. Be aware of new or prolonged warning signs and symptoms

Know your body, keep track of any new symptom or unusual change and seek medical advice if you feel “something is not right”.

10. Protect yourself, protect others

Bear in mind that a previous COVID-19 infection, is no guarantee of immunity against re-infection, and we are not out of the woods. So it is still vital to get your COVID-19 vaccine. And always remember the 3C’s and the 3W’s too!

11. Sign up for our IJN Wellness Post COVID-19 Health Assessment

If you suspect you are experiencing Long COVID or concern about your wellbeing after a COVID-19 infection, you may book an appointment with IJN Wellness Centre for proper investigations and professional consultation. Book your appointment at wellness@ijn.com.my or 03-26006421/6423.

STAY SAFE and STAY WELL

The battle against COVID-19 is still an ongoing uphill climb. While we pin our hopes on vaccination, every one of us still has to do our part in containing the spread. Here’s a reminder of the 3C’s and 3W’s of COVID-19 preventative measures.

