

Podcast on Post-Covid conditions

October 2021

Hello and good afternoon to everybody. We are happy that you join us for this Difäm podcast on Covid-19.

My name is Ute Papkalla and I am here with my colleague, Carina Dinkel, we are both members of the Difäm health team.

Today Carina and I will talk about the long-term health consequences of Covid-19, also called Long Covid, Post-Covid syndrome or with the most complex name Post-Acute Sequelae of Sars-CoV-2 Infection, abbreviated with PASC – P A S C. In this podcast, we will only use the name Long Covid.

Although most people recover from Covid-19 within a few weeks, some people experience Long Covid. Carina, can you explain this syndrome to us?

Yes, Ute, with pleasure. Even though we have three names for the phenomenon, there is no clear definition of the condition “Long Covid”. The so-called Long Covid consists of a wide range of new, returning, or ongoing health problems people can experience for four weeks or longer after having been infected with the virus. Even persons who did not show any or only mild symptoms of Covid-19 can suffer from Long Covid.

We use Long Covid as an umbrella term for about 200 reported manifestations. An acute Covid-19 infection can last up to four weeks. We currently define manifestations between week 4 and 12 as ongoing symptomatic Covid-19. Signs and symptoms that continue for more than 12 weeks are considered as post Covid-19 syndrome. The term Long Covid includes both, the ongoing symptomatic Covid as well as the post Covid syndrome. The patient with Long Covid is no longer infectious to others.

We will later discuss the manifestations of Long Covid in more detail. What I would like to know first is how big the problem is? How many people who have gone through a Covid-19 infection are affected?

From all we know to date, 10% to 13% of persons with a confirmed Covid-19 infection will develop long-term symptoms and conditions that have an effect on their daily health and wellbeing. That means that about 1 in 10 persons who have been infected with the virus

SARS Cov-2 will experience long-term consequences. Given the huge number of almost 240 million coronavirus cases worldwide by mid-October 2021, we can see that there is a giant wave of millions of patients rolling into national health systems.

[These are disturbing numbers. You said there are 200 different symptoms that may relate to Long Covid. Which are the most common?](#)

People suffering from Long Covid commonly report different combinations of symptoms. The most frequent constitutional problem is tiredness or fatigue that will not allow conducting normal daily activities. Some patients complain of muscle and joint pain.

Many patients also report neuro-psychiatric symptoms such as difficulties to think or to concentrate which is sometimes referred to as “brain fog”.

Some patients complain of problems with their memory and many COVID patients report the ongoing loss of smell or taste, which is already common in the course of the acute infection. Sleeping disorders also persist in some cases.

For a considerable number of patients the respiratory symptoms of COVID 19 seem to persist, such as difficulty in breathing or a shortness of breath, cough or chest pain. However, you may also find other symptoms such as digestive problems with diarrhoea or vomiting.

As you see, these symptoms are not very specific and not acute, but they interfere with daily living and make it difficult for patients to reintegrate in their work or fulfil their daily duties.

[Does that mean that it is quite difficult to diagnose Long Covid?](#)

Yes. The differential diagnosis of Long Covid is difficult. Therefore, it is very important to rule out other potential causes. You have to ask the patient for his or her detailed medical history. There may be other causes for the symptoms. A precondition for Long Covid is, of course, a Covid-19 infection confirmed either through a PCR test or through an antibody test. The patient should also let you know when the Covid-19 infection started and how severely it turned out to be.

You should do a physical examination of the patient and measure the vital signs and the baseline oxygen saturation. Pay special attention to nose, throat, lungs and heart. On the laboratory side, it will be good to do a complete blood count and the erythrocyte sedimentation rate. Other laboratory tests that are probably only available in bigger hospitals include among others the D-Dimer, electrolyte levels, a liver and renal profile, or the thyroid function. Apart from vital signs and oxygen saturation, and depending on the symptoms, it may make sense to do an electrocardiogram, a chest x-ray and a spirometry if those diagnostic tools are available. Those diagnostics are primarily recommended to rule out other reasons for the symptoms.

If you have a patient who is supposed to be suffering from Long Covid, you should explain the diagnosis carefully ask him or her to come once per month to verify the long-term symptoms and to re-evaluate possible causes.

Ok. Now I assume that my patient suffers from Long Covid because there are no other plausible reasons for the symptoms. What do we do next? Can we treat Long Covid?

We do know such long-term reactions to a viral infection from other diseases. Although we still do not understand the detailed mechanisms of Long Covid, we assume that it has to do with the response of the immune system to the infection. It is therefore important to let the patient know that he or she needs to strengthen their immune system.

That means that a person presumably suffering from Long Covid should get enough rest on the one hand, but on the other hand, he/she should engage in light physical activities such as walks or small exercises, if possible. In addition, the nutrition is important with a diet that includes many vitamins such as fruits and vegetables.

We can also give psychosocial support to patients with Long Covid. It will definitely help to explain to the patient that his or her condition will improve over time, but that patience, good collaboration and a regular follow-up are necessary.

In addition, we can use symptomatic treatment such as painkillers for headaches or severe muscle pain, cough medication or drugs to ease diarrhoea and vomiting.

We should always encourage our patient to keep up the spirit and not to lose hope. Long Covid can pass by itself.

Thanks for ending on this positive note. Since we do not have a simple and efficient treatment neither for Covid-19 itself nor for Long Covid, the best is to avoid infection. Fortunately we have the vaccines which reduce the risk of catching Covid-19 and therefore also of suffering from long-term health consequences. Therefore, our message is that every adult should be vaccinated as soon as possible. This will prevent an infection with the coronavirus in the majority of cases, weaken the course of any rare breakthrough infection and finally prevent severe Long-Covid.

Be blessed and stay safe

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