

Long Covid and Rehabilitation



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After COVID-19 infection, most people will start to feel better within a few weeks. However, for some people, symptoms can last for months after initial infection. Long Covid or “Post-Covid Condition” is now recognized by the World Health Organization. Long Covid can affect people who were admitted to hospital with Covid-19, as well as those who recovered at home. Even younger people or people with “mild” initial infection can develop Long Covid. Many people with Long Covid were previously healthy.

Over 200 symptoms of Long Covid have been identified including extreme fatigue, exercise intolerance, shortness of breath, dizziness, and cognitive impairment or “brain fog”. People may experience multiple symptoms across different body systems. Symptoms can be unpredictable, fluctuate, and change or develop over time. Extreme fatigue is the most common symptom reported. This fatigue is not the type that is easily relieved with rest or reconditioning. Fatigue can affect both physical and cognitive functioning. Many people with Long Covid experience ongoing difficulty with attention, memory, and concentration. A key feature of Long Covid fatigue is post-exertion symptom exacerbation (PESE), where symptoms worsen after physical, cognitive, or emotional energy expenditure.

The impact of Long Covid symptoms may affect a person’s ability to participate in their work and life roles. Long Covid can also have a significant impact on well-being and mental health. While there is still much to be learned about Long Covid, health care professionals,

including physiotherapists can assist individuals with Long Covid to self-manage their symptoms and improve their quality of life.

Rehabilitation approaches must be safe and tailored to the individual. Rehabilitation should be at an appropriate pace that does not cause worsening of symptoms or prolong recovery. People with Long Covid may need to modify their activity and daily tasks to stay within new energy limitations. Pacing and heart rate monitoring can be safe and effective self-management strategies for people with fatigue.

A physiotherapist can also assess and treat breathing patterns disorders often seen in people with Long Covid. Breathing patterns may change with the initial COVID-19 infection. These changes then may become habit even after the initial infection is resolved. Breathing re-training exercises may help manage breathlessness and other symptoms caused by dysfunctional breathing.

Long Covid is a new condition where research into the causes and treatments is still emerging. It is important for people with Long Covid to have appropriate diagnostic testing to rule out known causes for their symptoms. Exercise and physical activity recommendations should be used cautiously, be individualized, and be guided by a health care provider.

For a list of Private Practice Physiotherapists who specialize in Pulmonary/Respiratory Rehabilitation, go to Find A Physio on MPA’s Website: mbphysio.org/find-a-physio

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