



Will COVID-19 Lead to Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome?

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INTRODUCTION

"Recovering" from COVID-19 does not guarantee a return to a person's usual state of health. For one thing, some people with multi-system injury—particularly to the brain, heart and kidneys—may develop permanent dysfunction of those organs.

In addition, a more subtle form of chronic illness may develop. For some people with COVID-19, even those who are only mildly affected at first, the ensuing weeks and months of "recovery" bring a surprise and a betrayal: they do not return to full health. Although nucleic acid tests no longer detect the virus, people still suffer from ongoing symptoms. They call themselves "long haulers," and the condition is being called "long COVID."

HOW COMMON IS A LINGERING POST-COVID-19 ILLNESS?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) followed nearly 300 people who were PCR-positive for SARS-CoV-2 for several weeks. Three weeks after the positive test, nearly half of the patients still had symptoms, such as fatigue and cough—particularly people who were older or suffered from chronic diseases (1).

Italian investigators studied 143 confirmed COVID-19 patients after the most severe symptoms had ended. Sixty days after the onset of their illness, more than half of the patients continued to have multiple bothersome symptoms, and 41% reported a worsened quality of life (2).

Irish investigators studied 128 patients with PCR-documented SARS-CoV-2 infection and found that, at a median of 10 weeks after the initial COVID-19 symptoms, 52% reported persistent fatigue and 31% had not returned to work. Surprisingly, there was no association of post-COVID fatigue with the severity of the acute illness, nor with routine laboratory markers of inflammation and cell turnover (3).

Between December, 2019 and May, 2020, a group of patients conducted an online survey of patients who, by self-report, experienced symptoms consistent with COVID-19, in collaboration with University College, London, Well Cornell Medicine, New York, NY, and Oregon Health and Science University, Portland, Oregon. The survey consisted of 257 questions, was translated from English to eight other languages, and was completed by 3,762 patients (age 18 or older) from 56 countries—predominantly white, middle-class, and English-speaking. Of the respondents, 84% reported being hospitalized, and 27% reported a laboratory-confirmed diagnosis. At 7 months after the onset of the illness, continue fatigue, post-exertional malaise and cognitive dysfunction (all core symptoms of ME/CFS) remained in 77.0, 71.2, and 56.8%, and 67.5% were unable to work

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