

NO FRESH CHICKEN?

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Living Well

Hit by LONG COVID



ST PHOTO: EUGENE GOH

SUFFERER ON LONG COVID
I try to arrange things on the phone. I also have to space out phone calls because I can get breathless... Most people are supportive, but a very few do wonder if I'm making it up.

MS ANNE SOH (above), who organises arts and culture events for a non-profit organisation

Sufferers, doctors call for more awareness and support



Akshita Nanda
 Correspondent

Explaining long Covid to others is among the toughest challenges for sufferers, who need targeted help and rehabilitation while they slowly recover from symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating and chest pain.

Patients and doctors here call for greater awareness of the condition, which can affect one's personal life and workplace performance for the six months or more it takes for recovery.

Take Ms Anne Soh, who organises arts and culture events for a non-profit organisation.

Since contracting Covid-19 in end-February, the 51-year-old has had to reduce her workload, direct her team from her bed and hand over on-site work to colleagues.

"Instead of meeting in person, I try to arrange things on the phone. I also have to space out phone calls because I can get breathless," says Ms Soh, who suffers from fatigue and brain fog and has difficulty concentrating.

The hardest part for her is explaining her condition and new needs to people. "Most people are supportive, but a very few do wonder if I'm making it up," she says.

DIFFICULT TO TRACK LONG COVID NUMBERS

Long Covid is the term used to describe the signs and symptoms thought to be due to acute viral infection, though these persist or emerge after the first four weeks, says Dr Barnaby Young, head of the Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

He told The Straits Times in March that most Covid-19 patients will recover within four weeks after infection. Some may find their symptoms persisting for four to 12 weeks, with an even smaller number having symptoms that go beyond this period.

The Ministry of Health does not track the number of patients with persistent symptoms after Covid-19, according to a written response to parliamentary questions submitted in April.

However, Dr Young was part of an NCID-led study published last year, which tracked Covid-19 patients identified in 2020 before Singapore started its vaccination programme. The study estimated that 10 per cent of these recovered Covid-19 patients who were unvac-

DOCTOR ON LONG COVID
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DR BARNABY YOUNG, head of the Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases

inated reported persistent symptoms for six months after the initial infection. He says it is difficult to tell whether these symptoms were because of the Covid-19 infection or some other condition. There was also no control group to compare whether symptoms persist after other respiratory virus infections.

Some doctors report seeing a

greater demand for post-Covid-19 medical services.

In March, private healthcare group IHH Healthcare Singapore began offering a post-Covid-19 medical evaluation to check lung and heart function, as a result of demand noted by private clinics at its hospitals.

Cardiologist Edgar Tay from Asian Heart & Vascular Centre at Mount Elizabeth Hospital sees about two patients a week with post-Covid-19 symptoms, most commonly fatigue, chest pain, breathlessness and heart palpitations. This is more than last year.

His clinic offers the post-Covid-19 medical evaluation along with private clinic Respiratory Medical Associates located at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital. Both hospitals are under IHH Healthcare Singapore.

Dr Lim Jeong Hoon, senior consultant at the department of medicine at National University Hospital (NUH), started a Post Covid Rehab Clinic at NUH and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital in February. The clinic expanded from seeing patients once a month to fortnightly, and now weekly.

Dr Lim has seen about 100 patients since February, with many reporting fatigue and difficulty in concentrating.

Asked whether cases of long

Covid could be under-reported here, Dr Tay and Dr Lim say this is possible because patients might fear discrimination.

Dr Tay says patients may also not know what post-Covid-19 symptoms to look out for or think there is no treatment.

Dr Lim also cites "socio-economic status and workplace culture resulting in denial of symptoms and presenteeism".

Presenteeism is the act of showing up for work without being productive. People with fewer financial resources may not be able to take time off to rest or seek medical care, for example.

Dr Young points out that vaccination and boosters "significantly reduce" the frequency of long Covid syndrome.

"There is good evidence that long Covid is also less common after Omicron variant infection, compared with earlier variants such as Delta. Based on data from Britain, among vaccinated individuals, 5 to 10 per cent of them may report persistent symptoms four weeks after Omicron infection," he adds.

LONG COVID AT THE WORKPLACE

Mr Nav Vij, co-founder of brain health start-up Neurowyzr, thinks workplaces are not prepared for the impact of long Covid.

He says many companies offer mental health support, but counselling alone is not enough for long Covid.

His start-up offers "digital brain health screening" through cogni-

tive tests administered through laptops or mobile devices. These tests check for problems with cognition, including those associated with long Covid brain damage.

Neurowyzr's Digital Brain Function Scan is registered with the Health Sciences Authority and offered through private healthcare partners Parkway Shenton and Precious Medical.

Mr Vij anticipates greater demand for this and other brain health services as workers deal with the slow recovery from long Covid.

"A long-term, holistic approach that incorporates clinical brain health testing and monitoring to inform a proper diagnosis should be the standard.

"Receiving a diagnosis can enable the person to be recognised as having a physical illness that needs treatment and not be labelled as a poor performer at work," says Mr Vij.

One of Dr Lim's early patients returned to work despite having difficulty concentrating. The patient made mistakes at work and had to see Dr Lim for rehabilitation.

Dr Young of NCID says: "It is important to allow yourself to rest during this period and gradually get back to your usual activities, rather than ignoring symptoms and trying to just get through."

"Support from employers, family and friends is important to help with this."

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