

Support lifestyle adjustments at work

FROM C1

The problem is that Singapore has a culture of presenteeism that could make it difficult for workers with long Covid to admit their condition or get the help they need, doctors say, citing research from Japan that shows under-reporting of long Covid there because of the work culture.

Lower workloads and targeted physical rehabilitation are helpful for those with long Covid, but again, work culture can make it difficult for workers to ask for such modifications to their roles.

Singapore also ranks the lowest in Asia for help with such adjustments at the workplace, according to a survey by international consulting firm Mercer Marsh Benefits.

The survey results released in January found that 67 per cent of Singapore workers do not have access to lifestyle modification support, which could include flexi-work for pregnant mothers or those battling chronic health issues.

Dr Lim at NUH calls for more awareness and targeted support for patients with long Covid and notes that the United States Department of Health and Human Services declared long Covid a disability last year.

"This condition is not malingering," he says. "Society should educate the public to avert prejudice against the victims. A multi-tiered effort ought to be prepared to facilitate timely access to health professionals and accommodate their functional limitations in the community and workplace environment."

He has recommended cognitive training and relaxation techniques for long Covid sufferers with brain fog and have difficulty sleeping, as well as physical therapy for those who suffer fatigue.

He adds: "Exercise intensity should be meticulously prescribed and gradually adjusted by rehabilitation doctors and therapists as inadequate exercise protocol may cause harm and exacerbate the patient's condition."

COPING WITH LONG COVID – PACING AND ACCEPTANCE

Dr Young of NCID says: "Post-acute Covid syndrome is complex and highly variable. We do not have a drug treatment specifically for long Covid."

Instead, treatments are offered to relieve symptoms, as well as for any other health condition identified. Some patients are referred to rehabilitation specialists for a graded exercise programme.

"We also talk to patients about their fears and provide reassurance and guidance to help pace their recovery," he says.

Pacing is a keyword for long Covid sufferers like Ms Jillian Cheong, who used to rock climb once a week before contracting Covid-19 in February. Now, the 37-year-old needs to nap after breakfast to have the strength to eat lunch.

Pacing means to balance rest and recovery with the physical and mental demands of living.

Ms Cheong used to work as a flexi-adjunct teacher in schools. She would teach, go home and



SUFFERER ON LONG COVID
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DOCTOR ON LONG COVID
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DR LIM JEONG HOON, senior consultant at the department of medicine at National University Hospital

One day, she had a restless night, followed by no nap after breakfast. It sent her back to bed for three days.

"I couldn't take the kids to school. I couldn't do anything," she says.

"I've had a complete change in lifestyle. I have a certain amount of energy in a day and can't exceed it. I find that if you work within that energy level every day, you may be able to slowly extend it. If you exceed your energy level, it undoes all your hard work," she says.

Similarly, Ms Soh, the arts advocate, is exhausted by a 500m walk home from the bus stop, though she used to go on long walks of up to 14km before contracting Covid-19 in February.

She has seen some improvement after visiting a dedicated post-Covid-19 rehabilitation clinic in April, via a referral from a polyclinic.

She worked with an occupational therapist to understand the new limits of her body. From cooking every day, she now tries to cook once a week for her husband and three children aged 17 to 23. She is building up to exercising for 10 minutes twice a week.

To ensure she had strength to be interviewed by The Straits Times, she did not go out the previous day and rested at home instead.

"There were days I couldn't accept how everyone around me who had recovered from Covid-19 was okay, but I wasn't. But then there were days when I was too tired to care and needed to rest," she says.

She hopes to raise awareness of long Covid and gather others into a support group. It is less isolating to hear from others in the same position and it might also make the case stronger for the accommodations they need.

"The hardest thing is explaining this condition to people," she says. "Some think there's nothing wrong with you. But I'm comparing myself now to myself pre-Covid-19."

akshitan@sph.com.sg

Mother-of-three and former flexi-adjunct teacher Jillian Cheong used to rock climb once a week, but now needs to nap after breakfast to have the strength to eat lunch.
ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Treatment and rehabilitation

SYMPTOMS

Long Covid is a syndrome or group of symptoms occurring in people who have recovered from Covid-19 infection. These symptoms persist or emerge four weeks after the initial infection.

Dr Barnaby Young, head of the Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), says the syndrome is "complex and highly variable".

Symptoms include fatigue or lethargy or tiredness, brain fog and difficulty concentrating, cough and shortness of breath. The majority of patients steadily improve over time, he adds.

Dr Lim Jeong Hoon, senior consultant at National University Hospital's (NUH) department of medicine, says symptoms present without clear evidence of organ damage. His patients exhibit fatigue, breathlessness and heart palpitations. Some have headaches, insomnia, anxiety or depression or have lost their sense of taste or smell.

Dr Edgar Tay, a cardiologist from private clinic Asian Heart & Vascular Centre, mostly sees long Covid patients with fatigue, chest pain and palpitations. He says other symptoms include ringing in the ear, joint pain and gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhoea and loss of appetite.

Dr Young and Dr Lim add that the diagnosis of long Covid is based on the symptoms presented by patients after excluding other causes.

In October last year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined long Covid as a "post-Covid-19 condition" that "cannot be explained by an alternative diagnosis".

TREATMENT

Doctors The Straits Times spoke to say there is no specific treatment for long Covid.

Treatment is based on the symptoms presented by patients – for example, cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation for some of Dr Tay's patients, or cognitive training for patients with impairment to brain function.

Long Covid sufferers can get polyclinic referrals to post-Covid-19 rehabilitation clinics, including those at NUH, Ng Teng Fong General Hospital and NCID.

Dr Tay's private clinic also offers a post-Covid-19 evaluation service in collaboration with another private clinic, Respiratory Medical Associates, and the IHH Healthcare Singapore group.

LONG REHABILITATION

The WHO notes that symptoms of long Covid generally have an impact on everyday functioning. Symptoms may also fluctuate or relapse over time.

Dr Lim says many patients recover within six months, but a small number may suffer for more than a year. Some self-limit their activities as a result, while others suffer "incapacitating physical, mental and emotional distress".

Last year, the United States Department of Health and Human Services classified long Covid as a disability.

Dr Lim calls for more awareness of the condition here so sufferers can get the support they need. "It's important to give the body sufficient time for recovery and then scale up activities," he says.

Akshita Nanda

<p>specialist</p>	<p>specialist</p>	<p>specialist</p>
<p>APPLE EYE CENTRE Dr. Yeo Kim Teck Senior Ophthalmic Surgeon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cataract Surgery Retinal Disease Management Retinal Detachment Surgery Glaucoma Management Diabetic Eye Screening & Laser Myopia Management General Eye Screening & Treatment <p>290 Orchard Road #11-01 Paragon Medical Tel: 6235 7000 / 8333 1101 Email: info@appleeye.com.sg</p>	<p>Dr. GOH EYE SPECIALIST Adj. Assoc. Prof Goh Kong Yong</p> <p>Cataracts, Lasers, Glaucoma, Diabetic Retinopathy, Retinal Disorders, Double Vision, Floaters, Child Myopia, Blur Vision, Dry Eyes</p> <p>Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital #07-37 38, Irrawaddy Road, Singapore 329563 Tel: 6684 4140 / 9644 4830 (24 hr)</p> <p>SPECIALIST PAIN INTERNATIONAL CLINIC Dr Nicholas Chua Hai Liang, MBBS, MMed, Ph.D</p> <p>Special interests in complex spine pain, headaches, facial pain, nerve pain and severe cancer pain.</p> <p>Mount Elizabeth Novena Specialist Medical Centre 38 Irrawaddy Road, #07-22/23, Singapore 329563 Tel: (65) 6339 1880 / 8511 2119</p>	<p>SINGAPORE SPORTS AND ORTHOPAEDIC CLINIC</p> <p>Specialist Orthopaedic Surgeon and Consultant with special interest in Knee and Shoulder pain and Arthroscopy, Total Knee replacement, Neck & Back pain, Spine and Disc problem, Elbow, Foot & Ankle Problem</p> <p>#02-10/11/12 Gleneagles Medical Centre 6 Napier Road, Singapore 258499, SMS/HP: 9137 7787</p> <p>SIOW NEUROLOGY HEADACHE & PAIN CENTRE Neurology and Pain Specialist Treatment for Headaches and Chronic Pain Disorders (Migraine, Tension Headache, Neck Pain, Fibromyalgia, Neuropathic and Myofascial Pain) Also for Strokes, Parkinson's Disease, Dementia, Epilepsy, Sleep Disorders, Muscle & Nerve Disorders.</p> <p>Mount Alvernia Hospital, Medical Centre Bld. D, #08-59 820 Thomson Road, Singapore 574623 Tel: 6254 5289</p>