

Post COVID-19 syndrome: What support can patients expect from their GP?

Many people are experiencing health difficulties for several months after they have had COVID-19. There is work underway to make sure healthcare staff have more information about the longer-term effects of COVID-19 and how to look after these patients safely. This is due to be published by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) at the end of this year.

In the meantime, Patient Safety Learning and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) has developed this short guide to help patients with post COVID-19 syndrome (also known as Long COVID) understand the support they can expect from their GP.

You should be believed

Post COVID-19 syndrome is a real condition. GPs should believe you, listen, show empathy and acknowledge the diagnosis.

You do not need a positive test

You do not need a positive test or to have spent time in hospital to be diagnosed with post COVID-19 syndrome. Anyone with COVID-19, however mild, can go on to develop post COVID-19 syndrome.

All symptoms should be taken seriously

Post COVID-19 syndrome can affect any part of the body. GPs shouldn't dismiss ongoing COVID-19 symptoms as anxiety or due to psychological cause. Your full history and appropriate examination are needed to understand the impact of COVID-19.

Common symptoms in patients after 12 weeks include:

- Fatigue
- Breathing problems, persistent cough (respiratory)
- Muscle and bone pain (musculoskeletal)
- Headaches, brain fog, confusion, thought disorder and dizziness (neurological)
- Changes to heartbeat or pattern (cardiovascular)
- Nausea, bowel changes and indigestion (gastrointestinal)
- Persistent fever, pain, rashes and ongoing loss of smell and/or taste (general)
- Worsening diabetic control or worsening of underlying metabolic disease (metabolic)
- Sleep problems and mood changes (psychiatric and psychological).

GPs should always consider whether mood changes are a) primary symptoms, b) relate to the long-term impact of the virus, or c) related to the adjustment of being unwell and the uncertainty surrounding their recovery.

Other health issues should be ruled out

Before a diagnosis of COVID-19 syndrome is made, it is important that other causes of long-lasting symptoms are ruled out. GPs should review your symptoms as they usually would, so that you can access treatment or further investigations if needed. GPs do not have to wait until symptoms have been ongoing for 12 weeks to do this.