

IPCRG practice driven answers on COVID-19 and respiratory questions



How long will prolonged cough, tiredness and shortness of breath last in long-COVID/post-COVID syndrome patients?

What the research says

When considering persistent symptoms following an acute COVID-19 illness it is important to rule out other causes before assigning them as part of a post-COVID syndrome. A differential diagnosis of prolonged cough should be undertaken to rule out other potential causes such as chronic cough, asthma or an underlying malignancy.

Data on the duration of specific symptoms in long-COVID/post-COVID syndrome are limited and may be related to the underlying aetiology. For example, symptoms associated with depression, changes in activity or fitness levels or underlying organ damage may be more prolonged than post-viral persistent symptoms. However, there are limited data on the association of specific post-COVID symptoms and the underlying causation. Further research is needed in this area.

Cough, fatigue and shortness of breath are more prevalent and persistent among people who were hospitalised with acute COVID-19 illness. At 8 months follow up (Nguyen et al 2022; >1000 patients). Fatigue was reported in 61% of patients, shortness of breath with activity in 48% of patients, shortness of breath at rest in 7% of patients and cough in 2% of patients. At 12 months follow-up (Becker et al 2021; 90 patients) fatigue was reported in 46% and shortness of breath 21%.

For those patients who do not require hospitalisation, fatigue and shortness of breath may persist beyond 6 months for some while cough will likely have resolved by 6 months for most patients. Across 5 studies of mainly outpatients >6 months follow-up (Nguyen et al 2022; >2000 patients): Fatigue was reported in 25–34% of patients, shortness of breath in 13–22% of patients and cough in 2–13% of patients.

What this means for your clinical practice

- For patients with persistent symptoms following an acute COVID-19 illness, thoroughly assess individual symptoms and consider other potential causes and underlying diseases
- After diagnostic testing rules out chronic cough or other disease, patients in the post-acute phase can be reassured that their cough will likely resolve first, and fatigue and shortness of breath will resolve in three-quarters of patients within six months after having acute COVID-19 illness
- Be vigilant for symptoms persisting beyond 12 weeks from onset of the acute illness and consider appropriate assessment and/or referrals for persistent symptoms

For more information on the management of symptoms for those with long-COVID/post-COVID syndrome see our responses to these questions:

'How do we manage post-COVID respiratory symptoms?' Available at:

<https://www.ipcrg.org/resources/search-resources/how-do-we-manage-post-covid-respiratory-symptoms>

'How should post-COVID tiredness and fatigue be managed?' Available at:

<https://www.ipcrg.org/resources/search-resources/how-should-post-covid-tiredness-and-fatigue-be-managed>

'After serious pathology has been excluded, how do we manage common post-COVID symptoms?' Available at:

<https://www.ipcrg.org/resources/search-resources/after-serious-pathology-has-been-excluded-how-do-we-manage-common-post>

Useful links and supporting references

Becker C, et al. Long COVID 1 year after hospitalisation for COVID-19: a prospective bicentric cohort study. *Swiss Med Weekly* 2021;151:w30091.

Nguyen NN, et al. Clinical patterns of somatic symptoms in patients suffering from post-acute long COVID: a systematic review. *Eur J Clin Microbiol Infect Dis* 2022;41:515–45.

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