

Long COVID

Information in English

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What is Long COVID?

Long COVID describes the long-term impact on health following a COVID-19 infection. Frequently reported symptoms are for instance breathlessness, fatigue, reduced capacity as well as memory and concentration problems. However, the symptoms may differ considerably. Long COVID comprises both long-lasting COVID-19 infections (with symptoms persisting for at least four weeks) and the so-called post-COVID syndrome with symptoms persisting for at least 12 weeks).

The risk factors of developing Long COVID

The risk factors associated with Long COVID have not been fully identified yet. Age, specific pre-existing health conditions and a severe course of the COVID-19 infection may play a role here. There is some indication that complete protection via coronavirus vaccination reduces the incidence and severity of Long COVID symptoms.

We know for sure that basically anyone can develop Long COVID: both young and agile people with a mild COVID-19 infection and people whose infection was more severe.

What symptoms may occur in Long COVID?

The symptoms of Long COVID are not the same for all those affected. The possible complaints after a COVID-19 infection may vary greatly. Therefore it is not always easy for doctors to identify symptoms as Long COVID-related. However, those affected may suffer enormously. It is often not possible for them to live a normal life for a long time.

The most common Long COVID complaints include the following symptoms:

- **Tiredness, reduced capacity, weakness:** Various degrees of severity are possible, up to so-called **fatigue**, where those affected feel very tired, exhausted and worn out. Even minor physical or mental activities are difficult for them. Sleeping is not restful and does not improve fatigue sufficiently, which sometimes severely restricts their ability to work and also their social life.
- **Post-exertional malaise**, in brief **PEM:** The patient's reduced capacity deteriorates further following even minor physical or mental exertion, which is called post-exertional malaise. Symptoms may worsen immediately or with a delay of 24 to 72 hours after the relevant activity. Persons affected feel ill, which may last for days or even weeks. In the worst case, a person's condition may deteriorate permanently due to PEM.
- Persistent smell and taste dysfunction
- Shortness of breath, respiratory problems
- Sleep disorders
- Concentration and memory problems, also called "brain fog"
- Racing or pounding heartbeat – tachycardia or palpitations – typically when rising from a supine position. Rapid heartbeats may cause sudden dizziness, poor circulation, tremors, tiredness and other symptoms, while the blood pressure remains

constant. Experts call this condition postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, in brief **POTS**.

Can children develop Long COVID as well?

Even children may experience long-term health effects following a COVID-19 infection. Overall, however, Long COVID seems to occur less frequently in children and adolescents than in adults. Currently, there is evidence that girls, children with pre-existing health conditions and children with severe courses of COVID-19 infection are at higher risk of developing Long COVID.

The possible symptoms are similar to those occurring in adults.

- Tiredness, exhaustion, reduced capacity
- Reduced ability to cope with physical stress
- Headaches
- Smell and taste dysfunction
- Lack of concentration
- Shortness of breath
- Sleep disorders

Whenever children suffer from the above-mentioned symptoms, it is important to consider the possibility of Long COVID and have them checked by a physician. This applies in particular to children who had a COVID-19 infection before.

Note

In rare cases, children may suffer from an acute deterioration in health two to eight weeks after a COVID-19 infection, which may even result in the need for ICU treatment. This condition is a massive overreaction of the immune system which may occur as a severe complication of COVID-19 and is called **paediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome**, in brief: **P-MIS**. P-MIS is a disease in its own right, it is not associated with Long COVID.

The diagnostic process

First the doctor will ask for a detailed medical history of the patient. A list of all symptoms and their impact on everyday life will be made. The doctor will also perform a health

check including a physical examination to get an idea of the mental state and individual suffering of the patient. Other diseases that might cause similar symptoms must be ruled out. The doctor will decide whether more examinations should be performed.

The treatment of Long COVID

The aim of the treatment of Long COVID is to alleviate the symptoms and speed up recovery, to keep the symptoms from becoming chronic. As manifold as the symptoms of Long COVID are, as different the required treatment may be. The detailed treatment plan must be specifically adjusted to each individual patient. Therefore an accurate diagnosis is absolutely crucial.

Long COVID patients are primarily managed and monitored by their family doctors. Members of other medical professions and doctors specialising in other fields may be consulted as required. If there are any specific medical conditions (e.g. cardiovascular damage, pre-existing diseases), these must be treated appropriately. It is also possible to combine several types of support services.

Medical rehabilitation

Depending on the severity of the condition, the doctor may prescribe rehabilitation measures. The aim is to improve restricted physical functions and activities, allowing the patient to take part in social and work-related activities to the greatest possible extent.

What is pacing?

Pacing is a method of energy management that teaches patients to properly manage their available strength so that they do not push themselves beyond their individual limits. Pacing prevents excessive exertion. They may for instance use activity logs as well as heart rate and activity monitoring devices that help them determine when their personal energy limits are exceeded.

Pacing is recommended for people who suffer from a reduction in physical or mental performance – fatigue or post-exertional malaise – as a result of a COVID-19 infection. Pacing helps those affected to manage everyday life and avoid setbacks.

What is coping?

Coping is a term used to describe a person's efforts to deal with a stressful situation. It is often part of a Long COVID treatment concept to support patients in developing an appropriate coping behaviour. Depending on the individual symptoms, different strategies are used.

Sick leave due to Long COVID

As with any other illness, those affected by Long COVID who suffer from health-related problems and are unfit for work can see their family doctor and report sick.

Returning to work step by step

Employees who want to return to work after a sick leave of at least six weeks may agree, with their employer, on part-time work to facilitate reintegration into their job. Their working hours can be reduced by up to 50 per cent. For support, those affected may contact occupational health advisors and doctors from "[fit2work](#)" (website available in German).

Invalidity or occupational disability pension

If a person's state of health does not improve in the long term, the only option may be to apply for an invalidity or occupational disability pension. This application also includes an application for rehabilitation benefits. The application must be submitted to the Austrian federal pension fund (PVA). For further information, please refer to the website of the Chamber of Labour (Arbeiterkammer) at "[Pension wegen Krankheit](#)" (ill health retirement) (website available in German).

Returning to everyday life

When a person diagnosed with Long COVID is ready to return to normal everyday life depends, among other things, on the severity of the symptoms and the individual suffering of that person. The person's physical fitness and daily stress level also play a role

here. Whether it is possible for the person to return to work also depends on the type of job and working conditions. The attending physician will support their patients in setting individual targets.

In general, what patients need in this situation is rest and sufficient time for regeneration. Too much stress may increase the risk of deteriorating health.

Whom to contact

If you suspect that you may be suffering from Long COVID, please go see your family doctor. Specific patient groups may be treated in university hospitals in the course of various scientific programmes.

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