

Recovery not a straight road for long Covid sufferers

FROM C1

His clinics refer patients to occupational therapy, so they can redesign their lives, and physiotherapy, to rebuild strength and functioning. Patients also receive treatment for symptoms or referrals to relevant specialists.

The clinics also explain long Covid to employers and suggest modifications that can allow patients to continue working.

Dr Lim says about 60 per cent of long Covid patients recover within a year. "Though long Covid may not entail permanent disability, some symptoms such as brain fog and fatigue can incapacitate a patient and affect work performance

for some time. Instead of concealing or under-rating the condition, it would be better for the patient to inform the workplace and seek medical advice. The long Covid clinics have been communicating with employers to seek their understanding and arrange necessary job scope modifications."

Yet, patients are hesitant to talk about their condition, in case they are accused of malingering. Ms Anne Soh, who organises arts and culture events for a non-profit organisation, says that when she tries to explain her condition, some people think she is making it up.

The 51-year-old, who has fatigue and breathlessness, contracted Covid-19 in February after being vac-

inated. She thought she had regained 80 per cent of her energy in August, but then the fatigue worsened.

To manage this, she now stops whatever she is doing and takes a break as soon as she detects early signs of fatigue. "This way, I've been able to avoid being forced to rest for extended periods of two to three days before regaining strength."

She started a private long Covid support group with 11 members, who share strategies and resources to manage the condition. Some of them struggle with depression, she says, resulting from their lack of ability to function at pre-Covid-19 levels.

While resting and not fatiguing themselves are important for people with long Covid, medical experts say it is also important to resume activity and suitable exercise programmes.

Cardiologist Edgar Tay from Asian Heart & Vascular Centre at Mount Elizabeth Hospital has seen about one patient a week for post-Covid-19 symptoms. His clinic offers a post-Covid-19 medical evaluation with private clinic Respiratory Medical Associates at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital.

One of his patients, a middle-aged woman, was unable to sleep or work because of persistent coughing, breathlessness and chest pain. Her symptoms had to be tackled by a cardiologist, a respiratory physician and a neurologist. Following that, she started a low-intensity exercise programme, which has helped her symptoms improve and enabled her to return to work.

Many long Covid patients appear to benefit from such structured exercise programmes, Dr Tay says. Tan Tock Seng Hospital and local

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DR LIM JEONG HOON, senior consultant at National University Hospital's division of rehabilitation medicine, department of medicine

start-up Taggle Health are developing an app for such structured exercise programmes for people with long Covid. Called MoveVid, it is expected to be available in the first quarter of 2023, after the completion of an ongoing pilot study that aims to recruit at least 10 patients.

Awareness of long Covid and support for sufferers are growing, albeit somewhat late for people like Ms Nicholas.

She went to the accident and emergency (A&E) department

three times in 2022 – in March, July and October – when symptoms such as chest pains and breathlessness became too difficult to bear. In July, she asked an A&E physician about help for long Covid, but the doctor did not know where to direct her.

When she went to a polyclinic for a referral to a cardiologist, the doctor there told her "there's no such thing as long Covid", she recalls.

"He said: 'You're probably just having a panic attack.' And I was just like: 'I know how a panic attack feels, and this is not it.'"

Ms Nicholas lives with her parents, who are in their 60s. Her mother, who is retired, also contracted Covid-19 in February, but did not develop long Covid. Her father works in healthcare.

Through word of mouth, she finally found a long Covid clinic in a public hospital in end-August. It was a watershed moment, meeting a medical specialist who understood what she was going through and could offer some help.

"He said to me: 'I think you're finally at the right place.' It just took a weight off my shoulders, even though I knew I was still ill."

In her efforts to manage the symptoms, Ms Nicholas has given up caffeine, alcohol and socialising with friends as much as she used to. She cancelled her planned holiday in South Korea because she was worried about how the cold and physical exertion would affect her.

She says: "I'm keeping positive and reminding myself that I don't have to be in a hurry to experience the world. Travel and socialising will be waiting for me once I'm ready, in my own time and at my own pace."

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What is long Covid and how is it treated?

Long Covid, also known as a post-Covid-19 condition, is the term used to describe people with symptoms that develop and linger after they contract Covid-19. Such symptoms cannot be explained by an alternative diagnosis of other medical conditions.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the most common long Covid symptoms are fatigue, breathlessness and issues with mental focus. Symptoms usually develop about three months after the Covid-19 infection and persist for two months or more.

In October, the WHO called for greater awareness of long Covid because of its medium- to long-term effects on the health and wellness of patients. It said that national authorities should devote more resources to rehabilitation for patients, as well as research into the condition. The organisation noted that 10 to 20 per cent of people who contract Covid-19 go on to develop long Covid.

It is still unclear what risk factors might predispose someone to develop long Covid. WHO data shows that long Covid can develop regardless of a person's age, level of fitness, or the variant of Covid-19 virus contracted. However, there have been more reports of women getting long Covid than men.

Associate Professor Sophia Archuleta, head and senior consultant of National University Hospital's (NUH) division of infectious diseases, department of medicine, says symptoms of long Covid persist and fluctuate over time.

Long Covid has also developed in patients who were reinfected with

Covid-19, she adds.

"In our Singapore context, we are seeing fewer long Covid cases as we have a highly vaccinated population. Vaccination is still the best way to protect ourselves against all Covid-related complications, including long Covid."

Singapore does not have an official tally of long Covid patients in the country. Experts say it is difficult to quantify the number because there is no simple diagnostic test for long Covid. The condition is diagnosed when all other alternative explanations, such as asthma or a heart condition, have been excluded.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

There is no specific drug treatment for long Covid. Treatment involves addressing whatever symptoms the patient has, such as breathlessness, fatigue, weakness or gastric issues.

A structured exercise regimen can be beneficial to patients with respiratory symptoms. Tan Tock Seng Hospital and local start-up Taggle Health are developing an app for such structured exercise programmes for people with long Covid. Titled MoveVid, it will be available in 2023.

WHO notes that long Covid can significantly reduce a patient's ability to work or participate actively in society. Mental health

issues can also develop from the distress this causes.

Singapore has long Covid clinics at NUH, Ng Teng Fong General Hospital and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID). Private clinic Asian Heart & Vascular Centre at Mount Elizabeth Hospital offers a post-Covid-19 medical evaluation with private clinic Respiratory Medical Associates at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital. Both hospitals are under IHH Healthcare Singapore.

Between five and 10 patients a week are referred to the NCID clinic, says Associate Professor Barnaby Young, head of NCID's Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network.

The clinic advises patients on strategies to manage their symptoms. Rehabilitation and physiotherapy have been helpful for some of them.

Prof Young adds that reducing workload – thus cutting back on

long hours and stress – is often an important part of long Covid management. "Almost all patients we have seen in the clinic find that their symptoms do improve with time, and that

they are able to get back to a normal life and be discharged."

Akshita Nanda

MORE ON C3



The MoveVid app, together with a wearable pulse oximeter, offers a guided exercise programme that helps rehabilitate patients with long Covid. It will be available in 2023. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

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