

# The devastating effects of long-haul Covid and how you can deal with them



Lesego Seokwang



Experts say fatigue is one of the most common long-term symptoms of Covid-19. (PHOTO: GALLO IMAGES)

When she was diagnosed with Covid-19 in May, Stacey Smith\* was surprised considering the precautions she'd taken.

But what surprised her even more was how long the symptoms have lasted. It's been six months since her test came back positive, and while some of the symptoms have come and gone, others have remained.

"The symptoms I presented with at the start were fatigue, headaches, tummy issues, loss of smell, tight chest, shortness of breath, joint pain and brain fog," Stacey (46) tells us.

She was also diagnosed with pneumonitis (inflammation of the lung tissue) as well as inflammation of the arteries in her lungs.

Most of Stacey's symptoms cleared up after a few weeks, and her sense of smell returned after a few months. But there are some persistent symptoms that just won't go away – the most pronounced one being fatigue. Stacey describes feeling as if the tiredness is in her bones.

“During those first weeks, just taking a shower wiped me out and I ended up sleeping for hours,” she says. “Now it's not as bad, but even a short outing or trip to the doctor is incredibly tiring and I pretty much collapse into bed and sleep for an hour afterwards.

“The joint pain is also still awful and I constantly feel sore. I'm on anti-inflammatories, which help,” she says. “And I also still have brain fog sometimes, where I battle to remember a name or information immediately, which is hugely frustrating.

“After a day of work, my husband will point out that I'm reversing words when I speak to him, not realising I've done so. And the headaches also still hit me hard and make it hard to focus and get through the day, but at least they're no longer happening daily.

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”Her asthma, which had been stable since childhood, has been problematic since her diagnosis and she's had to use her pump twice a day.

Stacey's case isn't unusual. While most people who've had Covid-19 recover completely within a few weeks, some continue to experience symptoms for months after their initial “recovery”. It can even happen to those who had a mild version of the disease, and the ongoing symptoms can be debilitating.

It's informally known as “long Covid” and some people report “life-changing experiences that follow an initial infection that they managed at home, with symptoms becoming more severe over time”, according to a review by the UK's National Institute for Health Research.



Those who've been hospitalised or in bed for some time are advised to get moving because muscles will have weakened. (PHOTO: GALLO IMAGES)

## LINGERING COVID-19 SYMPTOMS

Although Covid-19 is a disease that primarily affects the lungs, it's become clear that it can damage other organs as well. The virus can cause significant cellular-level damage, says Dr Gregory Poland of the Mayo Clinic's Vaccine Research Group, and this increases the risk of long-term health problems.

Long or long-haul Covid is "a multisystem disease", says Professor Adrian Puren of South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases. What commonly happens is that symptoms arise in one physiological system, then subside only to arise in a different system, he says.

The most common symptoms include cough, low-grade fever and fatigue, Puren adds. "Other reported symptoms include shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, neurocognitive difficulties, muscle pain and weakness, gastrointestinal upset, rashes, metabolic disruption (such as poor control of diabetes), thromboembolic conditions (blood clots), and depression and other mental-health conditions."

Less common long-term symptoms include absence of smell, dry mouth and eyes, runny nose, red eyes, headache, absence of taste and issues involving the heart, says Professor Willem Hanekom, director of the Africa Health Research Institute.

Both those who've had mild and severe Covid-19 might have long-term effects, whether they have comorbidities or not, Hanekom says.

"These long-term effects aren't caused by ongoing infection with the virus that causes Covid-19, but rather by inflammation – the body's response to the infection – which is ongoing," he adds.

Long-term symptoms include:

- Heart damage – Scans taken months after recovery have shown lasting damage to the heart muscle, even in those who experienced only mild symptoms.
- Lung damage – The type of pneumonia commonly associated with Covid-19 can damage the tiny air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs and the resulting scar tissue can lead to long-term breathing problems.
- Brain damage – Covid-19 can cause strokes, seizures and Guillain-Barré syndrome, an autoimmune condition that causes temporary paralysis. It might also increase the risk of developing Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease.
- Blood clots – The disease can make blood cells more likely to clump together. Much of the heart damage caused by Covid-19 is believed to be due to small clots blocking tiny blood vessels in the heart muscle.
- Blood-vessel problems – The disease can also weaken blood vessels, which can potentially lead to long-lasting problems with the liver and kidneys.
- Fatigue – It's been noted that many people who recovered from severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) have gone on to develop chronic fatigue syndrome, a complex disorder characterised by extreme fatigue that worsens with physical or mental activity. The Mayo Clinic says the same might be true for people who've had Covid-19.

## **HOW LONG DO THE SYMPTOMS LAST?**

It's difficult to predict long-term outcomes because Covid-19 is such a new disease, but research is ongoing and scientists can draw expectations from similar diseases.

"Possible causes of the long-term symptoms include relapse or reinfection, inflammation and immune reactions," Puren says.

“These have also been the case with other more severe coronavirus infections, including Sars and Middle East respiratory syndrome (Mers).

“Many patients recover spontaneously – if slowly – with holistic support, rest, symptomatic treatment and gradual increase in activity,” Puren says.

Hanekom adds that many infections have post-infectious inflammatory symptoms such as an ongoing cough after a mild viral chest infection. In most cases, these inflammatory symptoms eventually subside, which is what’s anticipated for Covid-19 too.

\*Not her real name.