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LONG COVID IN KIDS HARD TO PINPOINT

While doctors in Singapore say they do see the condition in kids, it is ill-defined and children may be unable to articulate how they are feeling



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Primary school pupil Sophie loves dancing, but a month after getting Covid-19 in mid-2022, she suffered from headaches, double vision and issues with balance.

For months, she could not walk without support, let alone dance. She had to skip most of the latter half of her Primary 4 school year.

Sophie's mother Julia, who asked for them both to be known only by their first names, had to take leave from her job in the technology industry for four months to care for her child.

It was an anxious time. "Sophie couldn't walk, she lost her balance," recalls the 45-year-old. "I kept thinking, 'How is she going to go through the rest of her life with double vision and not being able to walk?'"

At one point, Julia was told that her daughter's symptoms were psychosomatic, which means that the doctor thought that mental concerns, such as stress, were causing the physical woes.

"I understand where that was coming from, but it was not helpful," Julia says. "Even if it were psychosomatic, we still needed to know how to address it."

After numerous diagnostic tests, including magnetic resonance imaging, blood work and eye examinations, doctors decided that Sophie was suffering post-acute sequelae of Covid-19. This is also known as long Covid or post-Covid-19 condition.

People with long Covid may suffer physical, cognitive and mental health impairments after a Covid-19 infection. Sufferers have

described a number of symptoms, including persistent coughing or asthma-like symptoms; chest pain; heart palpitations; prolonged fatigue; anxiety; sleep disturbances; brain fog and immune disorders.

In November 2022, Sophie started a therapeutic regimen that included virtual-reality (VR) sessions at the National University Hospital (NUH) to help her with her balance. After four months, her mobility and balance improved.

From March 2023, she was able to walk without support. Now in Primary 6, she will soon turn 12 and is back to dancing.

Julia says: "She is back to 100 per cent. I'm afraid to even utter the words because I'm afraid that I will jinx it."

LONG COVID ILL-DEFINED

Doctors in Singapore say they are seeing cases of long Covid in children here. However, they add, it is difficult to identify the condition.

First, long Covid is ill-defined. It is being recognised via a broad range of symptoms that develop after Covid-19 infection, which cannot be explained by any other medical reason.

Second, children may be unable to articulate how they are feeling. Symptoms such as a persistent cough are easier to recognise, but others, such as fatigue or difficulty concentrating, may be misunderstood by parents.

Dr Shivani Paliwal, a paediatrician in private practice and head of IMC Children Clinic, recalls the case of a six-year-old who complained of fatigue three to four weeks after a Covid-19 infection.

This could have been easily overlooked, but she ordered a blood test, which showed that the child had high levels of creatine phosphokinase, indicating some stress and muscle injury. Rest was recommended.

Dr Paliwal is also seeing more cases of concurrent upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs) alongside or soon after Covid-19 infection. It is difficult for doctors to tell whether the child's symptoms are because of Covid-19 infection or the other URTIs.

Dr Dawn Teo, an otorhinolaryngologist at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, sees patients with long Covid symptoms, such as persistent nasal obstruction,



Sophie playing virtual-reality games as part of her therapy with Mr Derek Tan and Ms Jessica Law, both senior physiotherapists in the Department of Rehabilitation at National University Hospital, in November 2022. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JULIA



Some children with long Covid may experience fatigue but find it difficult to express how they feel. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

runny nose, cough and tiredness. The patient's parents also report snoring, heavy breathing and disrupted sleep at night, which are associated with nasal congestion.

In the past year, she has seen more patients with these symptoms, but says it is difficult to estimate how many actually have long Covid. Fifteen to 20 per cent of such patients have a history of a recent URTI plus a positive Covid-19 test.

Dr Liew Woei Kang, consultant paediatrician at the Paediatric Allergy Immunology Rheumatology

Centre, says: "We evaluate many patients with chronic cough. Many parents think it is due to long Covid, but often it is due to recurrent infections, allergic rhinitis or asthma. There is a clear break between the cough of the Covid-19 infection and the next respiratory infection."

Dr Liew, whose centre is a subsidiary clinic of Foundation Healthcare Holdings, has seen two cases of long Covid in children in the past year.

In response to queries from The Straits Times, the Ministry of

Health confirmed that there is no official tally of long Covid cases in Singapore. This had been stated in the reply to a Parliamentary Question in 2022.

Anecdotally, numbers seem to be down.

Dr Mark Ng Chung Wai of Sing-Health Polyclinics says he has not seen any patient with long Covid concerns in the past year. The senior consultant and clinical lead for the Infection Prevention and Infectious Disease Committee Workgroup at the polyclinics says he did see such patients from early to mid-2022. He referred them to the long Covid clinic run by the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

Associate Professor Barnaby Young, head of the Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network, says the long Covid clinic at NCID was less busy in 2023, with about half the referrals received in 2022.

Long Covid has become less common as the pandemic has progressed, he adds, thanks to pre-existing immunity from vaccinations and earlier infections.

Post-Covid Rehabilitation Clinic services are also run at NUH and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital.

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