

Persistent cough, fatigue most common symptoms

FROM C1

Dr Lim Jeong Hoon, senior consultant at NUH's Division of Rehabilitation Medicine, Department of Medicine, says these clinics had 190 patient visits in 2023, a drop from 250 in 2022. His data shows that 70 per cent of patients are discharged from the clinic within a year, and 20 to 25 per cent recover within two years.

The outpatient Paediatric Infectious Diseases clinic under NUH has seen 10 to 15 young patients with long Covid to date, according to Dr Chan Si Min, who is the hospital's head and senior consultant at the Division of Paediatric Infectious Diseases, Department of Paediatrics, Khoo Teck Puat - National University Children's Medical Institute.

A survey conducted by researchers from KK Women's and Children's Hospital between Oct 14, 2022, and Jan 15, 2023, found that one in six children and young persons (aged from zero to 18 years) developed long Covid.

The most common symptoms were persistent cough, nasal congestion and fatigue. About half of the patients recovered within six months.

KKH declined to respond to questions about how many cases of long Covid it has managed.

Dr Lim Yang Chern, paediatrician at Thomson Paediatric Centre, Thomson Medical, has seen between 20 and 25 patients a month with post-Covid-19 symptoms since early 2023. Three-quarters of these have symptoms that persist for 12 weeks. Most of these patients are unvaccinated.

While he usually sees children with mild asthma-like symptoms or allergic rhinitis-like symptoms, some have fatigue or other neurological issues.

He saw a primary school pupil around 10 or 11 years old, who became fidgety and was unable to focus on his studies after a Covid-19 infection. The child was assumed to be acting out, but Dr Lim realised that the child truly could not concentrate, despite trying.

He wrote a memo to the school asking teachers to let the child take a bathroom break if he was fidgety. Given rest and appropriate support at home and school, the child's symptoms resolved in four months.

"Parents need to have greater awareness that neurological long Covid does exist," says Dr Lim. "The children with cognitive and psychological sequelae are at risk of being misunderstood."

LIVING WITH LONG COVID

In general, treatment of long Covid is geared towards alleviating symptoms and adjusting daily routines to allow the patient time to rest and heal.

Dr Khong Haojun, family physician and associate consultant at the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP), says patients with long Covid present with prolonged cough or fatigue and lethargy that persists for four weeks after recovering from a Covid-19 infection.

"Depending on the symptoms, patients would be offered medications and health interventions, such as advice on a graduated return to exercise and physical activity, or quitting smoking to help relieve symptoms," adds Dr Khong, who is also Advisor for Infectious Diseases & Immunisa-



Paediatricians say parents play a vital role in identifying long Covid in their children and in managing the symptoms. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

tion Specialty Advisory Group at NHGP.

Dr Steve Yang, respiratory physician at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, sees about 10 patients a month with respiratory-related long Covid symptoms. These include fatigue, shortness of breath and issues with focus, or brain fog.

Targeted physiotherapy and reduced workloads help such patients, he says. However, he cautions that recovery may be slow and incomplete as symptoms can last for months. "Persistence in lifestyle changes and optimism are important factors that will help in their recovery," he adds.

Paediatricians say parents play a vital role in identifying long Covid in their children and in managing the symptoms. Social support from schools and childcare centres or family and friends is also crucial.

Dr Chan says once organ dysfunction and other medical issues have been excluded, paediatric patients with long Covid at NUH are offered physiotherapy and occupational therapy to help them with activities of daily living.

She may, for example, request the school to allow children to use the lift instead of having to climb stairs to reach their classrooms, and exempt them from physical education and sports. The teachers may need to help them more with schoolwork, or give them more time to complete it.

Dr Chan adds that in Sophie's case, "the dizziness and balance issues are likely neurological symptoms of long Covid. As to why this occurs, the jury is still out, but

After four months, she was much better. I could see improvement in her mobility and balance. My advice to other parents is to let the child truly rest. Don't attempt to go to school or rush to pick up your life again.

JULIA, whose daughter Sophie suffered from long Covid but is no longer experiencing its symptoms, on how parents can help their kids on the road to recovery

proposed mechanisms include inflammation or injury or damage to the nerves or blood vessels."

Vestibular rehabilitation was key to Sophie's recovery, with exercises that helped her manage her dizziness and balance. From November 2022 to February 2023, she went for weekly, and then fortnightly, sessions at NUH.

Her therapy included VR goggles while in a harness for support, and playing games with dynamic movements, such as tennis.

Ms Jessica Law, senior physiotherapist at NUH's Department of Rehabilitation, says: "Virtual reality has been found to be helpful to improve symptoms through optokinetic stimulation, which gradually improves patients' tolerance to triggering stimuli."

The games improved Sophie's postural control and were also fun, encouraging her to continue with the therapy.

Julia says: "After four months, she was much better. I could see improvement in her mobility and balance."

She is also grateful for the school's support in granting Sophie time off to rest. Sophie was allowed to advance to Primary 5 based on her prior performance.

"My advice to other parents is to let the child truly rest. Don't attempt to go to school or rush to pick up your life again," says Julia. "To me, it's a miracle that she has recovered fully."

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Why high blood pressure matters to your health

NEW YORK - Nearly half of American adults have high blood pressure, but only a quarter of those with the condition have it under control, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

High blood pressure is a smouldering public health crisis, said Dr Rishi Wadhwa, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and an author of new research showing that blood pressure screenings have not returned to what they were before the coronavirus pandemic.

High blood pressure can raise the risk of heart attack, stroke, pregnancy complications and other health problems, but the symptoms are often silent, Dr Wadhwa said.

"I worry it flies under the radar for many patients," he added.

Here is what to know about the issue, and how to get your blood pressure under control.

WHAT IS BLOOD PRESSURE?

Blood pressure is the force that blood exerts against artery walls in the heart, said Dr Jim Liu, a cardiologist at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.

You will always hear your blood pressure given as two numbers. The top number, known as systolic pressure, measures that force when the heart contracts. The bottom number, known as diastolic pressure, gauges the force when the heart muscle relaxes. It is measured in units known as millimetres of mercury, or mm Hg.

You can have your blood pressure checked during a medical appointment or at a pharmacy, or you can check it yourself with a home monitor.

The American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology define normal blood pressure as below 120/80 mm Hg. The CDC defines high blood pressure as 130/80 mm Hg or higher.

Very high blood pressure can cause symptoms including severe headaches, chest pain and dizziness. For many people, however, blood pressure increases too gradually for them to notice these issues, Dr Liu said.

WHY IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE HARMFUL?

High blood pressure forces the heart to work harder to pump blood. Over time, the overwhelmed heart can slowly start to falter and struggle to pump blood out to the rest of the body, a condition called heart failure.

The force and friction of high blood pressure can also injure the delicate lining of the arteries, Dr Liu said. Tears in the artery wall allow LDL cholesterol - also known as "bad" cholesterol - to latch on and form clumps, or plaques, in these gaps. This can block blood flow and, in some patients, cause a heart attack.

Blockages in arteries that carry blood to the brain can lead to a stroke. Long-term damage to blood vessels in the brain can also lead to a condition called vascular dementia, Dr Liu said.

WHAT LEADS TO HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

All arteries stiffen over time, leading blood pressure to climb steadily as people age. By age 75, an estimated 80 per cent of men and 86 per cent of women in the United States have high blood pressure.

Multiple risk factors have been linked to high blood pressure, including smoking, heavy drinking, obesity and chronic stress. A lack of exercise and diets high in sodium and processed foods have also been associated with an increased risk of hypertension.

HOW CAN YOU REDUCE YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE?

For some people, lifestyle changes can be as powerful as medication, said Dr Martha Gulati, director of preventive cardiology at the Smidt Heart Institute at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles. She recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day and sleeping seven to nine hours a night, both of which are associated with lower blood pressure.

Maintaining or achieving a healthy body weight can also reduce blood pressure, Dr Gulati said.

Avoiding products that contain nicotine is important. Using nicotine drives up blood pressure, narrows blood vessels and may contribute to hardening of arteries, according to the American Heart Association.

Some research suggests that following a low-sodium diet could reduce blood pressure by 2 to 8 mm Hg for some patients, and that adopting the Dash diet - which emphasises fruit, vegetables and low-fat dairy products - could reduce blood pressure by eight to 14 points.

Abstaining from alcohol or limiting consumption to no more than one glass a day for women and two glasses for men could reduce blood pressure by two to four points.

People who cannot lower their blood pressure to normal levels through lifestyle changes will need medication, Dr Gulati said.

Water pills, or diuretics, help remove sodium and water from the body, bringing down blood pressure. Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors and angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs) both relax blood vessels, though they work in different ways. Calcium channel blockers help relax the muscle cells of blood vessels, and some slow your heart rate.

People who cannot lower their blood pressure with these drugs may need additional medications. Doctors take a patient's age, health and risk factors into consideration before deciding what medication to prescribe.

"Blood pressure is the most modifiable risk factor for heart disease and stroke," Dr Gulati said. "With lifestyle changes and medications, our patients can take control of it - and their heart health."

NYTIMES



You can have your blood pressure checked during a medical appointment or at a pharmacy, or check it yourself with a home monitor. PHOTO: PIXABAY

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