

What If Your COVID Symptoms Don't Go Away?

By Northern Rehab Physical Therapy Specialists

There is a lot of variation in how COVID affects people. Some feel like they have a bit of a cold, some feel like they have the flu, and some end up in the hospital. No matter the symptoms, we tend to think that people get sick, they get better and recover, then move on. Most of the time, that's what happens, but for about 10% of people who get COVID, the experience is different.

You may have heard about people who had a COVID-19 infection and have lingering symptoms for weeks or months after the initial infection. This is now referred to as Long COVID, defined as experiencing ongoing symptoms for more than 12 weeks after the initial infection. Long COVID tends to involve more than one system and currently has a list of over 200 possible symptoms, but most people have 3 most common symptoms including extreme fatigue, post-exertional symptom exacerbation (PESE), and problems with memory or concentration - commonly referred to as "brain fog." Other common symptoms are loss of taste and smell, shortness of breath, chest pain or tightness, insomnia, muscle or joint pain, depression/anxiety, and stomach problems like stomach aches, loss of appetite or diarrhea.

The extreme fatigue associated with Long COVID affects the ability to complete daily tasks. It causes severe tiredness that you can't get rid of with rest or sleep. It's also not related to doing some physically demanding task. People experience exhaustion for no obvious reason. The fatigue is so severe that it impacts the ability to complete daily tasks.

Post-exertional symptom exacerbation, or PESE, is a disabling and often delayed exhaustion disproportionate to the effort made. Patients are referring to this as a "crash". PESE is very common in people suffering from Long COVID. Seventy-five percent of people who have Long COVID have PESE after 6 months. The activity may trigger a crash with something that was easily tolerated before the COVID-19 infection, such as taking a shower, walking, attending a social activity, or even being in a high sensory environment with flashing lights and loud noises.

"Brain fog" isn't a medical condition. Instead, it's a term used by patients to describe thinking that is sluggish or fuzzy. In severe cases, people describe it as feeling like their brain shuts down. They could be in the middle of a sentence and not be able to think of anything more to say. They could be at work doing a task they've done a thousand times and be unable to think of the next step. Just like the extreme fatigue and PESE already described, the brain fog associated with Long COVID is disabling and affects every aspect of daily life.

Physical Therapy can help aid recovery from Long COVID. Physical therapists are highly trained medical professionals who are experts at helping people recover their mobility and function after a serious illness, injury, and disease, including recovering from Long COVID. A variety of

different treatments are designed to help reduce pain, manage fatigue, improve activity tolerance, and return each person to their previous level of functioning.