**Long COVID — long-term health outcomes, and implications for policy and research**

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**Abstract: Long Covid, which refers to post-acute and chronic sequelae of SARS-CoV-2, can affect nearly every organ system. Its high and growing toll calls for an urgent need to understand how to prevent and treat it. Governments and health systems must address the care needs of people with Long Covid.**

Shortly after the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic, reports emerged showing that some individuals infected with SARS-CoV-2 developed persistent symptoms and new health problems that arose long after the acute phase of infection and could not be explained by other factors1. The patient community who, to their credit, first recognized and reported this new syndrome, used the term ‘Long COVID’ to describe the post-acute and chronic sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection1. Long COVID can affect people across the lifespan — children, young adults, and older adults — and across sex, race and ethnicity, and baseline health status2. Importantly, this syndrome not only affects patients who had severe COVID-19 but has also been observed in individuals who were asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic during the acute phase of SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Long COVID often manifests as fatigue and neurocognitive impairment (also referred to as ‘brain fog’), and can affect nearly very organ system, with a broad array of extrapulmonary sequelae that include acute kidney injury (AKI) and chronic kidney disease3**.** Although the rates of AKI during the acute phase of SARS-CoV-2 infection have declined dramatically since the early days of the pandemic, new concerns about the long-term consequences of SARS-CoV-2 infection to kidney health have since emerged. In a study from the US Department of Veterans Affairs, which involved 89,216 people with COVID-19 and 1,637,467 non-infected controls, those who survived the first 30 days of SARS-CoV-2 infection had a higher risk of AKI, estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) decline, kidney failure and major adverse kidney events (defined as eGFR decline ≥50%, kidney failure, or all-cause mortality) than non-infected controls4. Importantly, even individuals with mild COVID-19 and without AKI during the acute infection had increased risk of adverse kidney outcomes; the risk increased gradually according to the severity of the disease during the acute phase of the infection. For example, compared with uninfected controls, individuals with COVID-19 had a greater loss of eGFR — estimated at –3.26 (–3.58 to –2.94), –5.20 (–6.24 to –4.16), and –7.69 (–8.27 to –7.12) ml/min/1.73 m2 per year, in individuals who were not hospitalized, hospitalized, or admitted to intensive care, respectively, during the acute phase of SARS-CoV-2 infection4. Notably, in individuals with a mild SARS-CoV-2 infection who did not require hospital admission, the associated eGFR decline in the year following the infection (–3.26 ml/min/1.73 m2) was nearly equivalent to the eGFR decline expected to result from normal ageing over 4 years.

The presence of AKI clearly increases the risk of post-COVID-19 kidney outcomes4. A study of 1,612 patients in the first year of the pandemic showed that while individuals with AKI from causes other than COVID-19 has a mean eGFR slope of -2.7 ml/min/1.73 m2 per year, those with COVID-19-associated AKI had much steeper declines in eGFR with a mean eGFR slope of -16.7 ml/min/1.73 m2 per year and a corresponding difference in slope –14.0 ml/min/1.73 m2 per year)5. Another study involving 1,734 patients who were hospitalized for COVID-19 followed for nearly 1 year also showed that those with AKI during the acute phase had greater odds of reduced kidney function (defined as eGFR < 60 ml/min/1.73 m2), proteinuria, and8.5% greater longitudinal decline in eGFR than people without AKI6. Collectively, this evidence suggests COVID-19 increases the risk of adverse long-term kidney events. These findings call for integration of kidney care components into post-acute COVID-19 care strategies4.

Beyond its effect on kidney disease, SARS-CoV-2 infection can also lead to post-acute development of substantial cardiac cellular abnormalities and clinical sequelae including dysrhythmias, ischemic heart disease, heart failure, pericarditis, myocarditis and thromboembolic disease7. Glycometabolic abnormalities are also evident in many survivors of acute COVID-19 and, in some cases, manifest as overt new-onset diabetes mellitus8.

Analysis of neuro-imaging data collected pre-infection and 4–5 months post-infection suggests that SARS-CoV-2 can lead to substantial structural changes in the brain, including reduction in grey matter thickness and global brain volume9. These alterations were evident even in individuals with mild cases of COVID-19. Moreover, experimental studies have revealed multiple biological pathways that can explain a broad array of neurological disorders in the post-acute phase of SARS-CoV-2 infection, including ischaemic and haemorrhagic stroke,cognition and memory disorders, seizure disorders, peripheral nervous system disorders and mental health disorders10.

Of note, vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 seems to only confers partial protection against Long COVID; vaccine-associated risk reduction is most evident for pulmonary and coagulation disorders, but this protection is attenuated substantially in immunocompromised individuals. Whether the risks of Long COVID differ depending on the virus variant, and whether therapeutics for acute COVID-19 can reduce the risk of post-acute sequelae is not yet clear and remains under investigation.

Compelling evidence clearly suggests that the pandemic may result in millions of people with new-onset kidney disease (and other non-communicable diseases including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and neurological disease). These are chronic conditions that require lifelong care and the rise in their prevalence will have wide ramifications on every sector of our lives including labour participation, economic productivity and societal wellbeing. Governments and health systems must therefore be prepared to deal with the impending rise in patients in need of health care. Building health system capacity to deliver care equitably to those who need it must be prioritized.

More than two years into the pandemic, we still do not have systems that enable the assessment of the toll of Long COVID and its myriad complications, including kidney disease. Current surveillance systems capture acute effects of infectious disease but do not account for their post-acute and long-term effects. This gap needs to be urgently addressed and thus governments and health systems must develop adequate data systems that can capture this missing information. These data will be vital to inform health system planning for post-COVID care. Of note, the effects of SARS-CoV-2 infection and, more broadly, of the pandemic, on the rates of non-communicable diseases, life expectancy and economic indicators should also be evaluated.

# The development of a large-scale clinical trial programs to test therapeutics for Long COVID is another urgent need. Experimental studies using organoid and animal models have potential to clarify the mechanisms of injury underlying Long COVID and to inform therapeutic strategies. Moreover, given that currently approved SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are limited in their ability to reduce the risk of viral transmission and of developing Long COVID, vaccine strategies that can address these shortcomings are also urgently required. Finally, comparative studies that can examine differences and similarities in the biology and clinical features of Long COVID and other infection-associated illnesses (for example, ‘Long Flu’ following influenza infection and chronic fatigue syndrome) are also urgently needed.

Long COVID refers to the disability and disease experienced by many people who survive the acute phase of COVID-19. Despite its name, SARS-CoV-2 not only causes acute respiratory disease but can also lead to extrapulmonary conditions in nearly every organ system (including acute and chronic kidney disease) and has affected millions of lives around the world. Given the scale its scale, and the chronic nature of several of its sequelae, Long COVID will reverberate with us for decades, and will have broad and deep social, economic, political, and global security implications, long after the COVID-19 pandemic abates. This pandemic provides a historic opportunity not only to understand Long COVID, but also other post-viral conditions and infection-associated chronic illnesses, and to increase preparedness for the — certain to come — next pandemic. Urgent attention is needed to identify optimal care pathways to lessen the risk of further health loss and death among affected populations. These goals demand greater attention and a much needed — but so far absent — coordinated global response strategy.

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# Competing interests

# The authors declare no competing interests.

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