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.
Persistent cough, fatigue most common symptoms

From C1

Dr Lim Yong Toon, senior consultant at NUHS Division of Rehabilitation Medicine, Department of Medicine, says these clinics had 50 patients this year, a drop of around 30%, and that 70% of patients are discharged from the clinic in a year, and 20 to 25 per cent recover within two weeks.

The competent Pulmonary Infections Disease clinic under NUH has seen 20 to 30 patients with long Covid in its clinic, according to Dr Chan S Kim, who is the hospital’s head and senior consultant at the Division of Pulmonary Infections Disease, Department of Pulmonary, Rheo Thorac – National University Children’s Medical Institute.

A survey conducted by researchers at the Women’s and Children’s Hospital in June 2022 showed that one in 10 children and young people aged 10 to 19 years developed long Covid.

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

NUHS has responded to questions about the number of cases of long Covid it has managed.

Dr Lim Yong Toon, gastroenterologist at Thomson Pulmonary Centre, Thomson Medical, has seen between 20 and 30 patients a month with post-Covid symptoms since early 2021. Two-thirds of these patients had symptoms for months, and only a third of these patients are housebound.

He also notes that children with mild asthma-like symptoms or allergic rhinitis-like symptoms, such as fatigue or other neurological issues.

For a primary school pupil aged 10 or 11 years old, who became severely ill and was unable to function in his studies or during extracurricular activities. The child was assumed to be acting out, but Dr Lim eventually found out that the child truly could not concentrate, despite trying.

He wrote to the school asking teachers to let the child have a bathroom break if he feels tired. Given rest and appropriate support, the child’s symptoms resolved in four months.

“Parents need to have greater awareness of neuropsychological symptoms,” says Dr Lim. “Long Covid can cause cognitive and psychological sequelae, and an inability to concentrate is a 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 Hoon, family physician and associate consultant at National Polyclinics (NP), says patients with long Covid present with prolonged cough or fatigue and joint pain that persists for months after recovering from a Covid-19 infection.

“Depending on the symptoms, patients would be offered modifications 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 Disease & Immunology Specialty Advisory Group at NUH.

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

“Although physiotherapy and sleep form part of the pathway for each patient, he says. However, he cautions that recovery may be slow and incomplete as symptoms can last for months.”

“Clinicians are finding that the best interventions for managing long Covid are individualized.”

For example, parents are encouraged to participate in family therapy to help with the child’s condition.

Dr Chan adds that in Sophia’s case, “the diagnosis and balance issues are likely neurological symptoms of long Covid. As to why this occurs, the jury is still out, but proposed mechanisms include inflammation or injury or damage to the nerves or blood vessels.”

The study also showed long Covid was key to long-term recovery, with exercises that helped her manage her dizziness and balance. From November 2022 to January 2023, she went for weekly, and then twice-weekly, sessions at NUS Department of Rehabilitation.

Dr Khong says that, ultimately, the best approach to managing long Covid depends on why symptoms occur.

In Sophia’s case, her symptoms were triggered by anxiety.

Dr Khong says the patient’s problem was that of “the fear of fear itself,” which is a common occurrence in long Covid.

“Her fear of anxiety was that it would lead to a relapse,” says Dr Khong.

After four months, she was much better. She could see improvement in her mobility and balance. Her 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 Khong.

JULIA, whose daughter Sophia went from long Covid but is no longer experiencing its symptoms, now works with a child’s clinic on how to help others who have the same problem.

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