

Long COVID – Chronically Problematic, a Scoping Review.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020 the world was devastated by COVID-19, 3 years on, it still has lingering effects. COVID-19 presented as severe pneumonia-like symptoms and had the ability to infect others through droplet spread (Cloete *et al.*, 2021). The diagnostic process for COVID-19 thus far, has been solely based on diagnosis of COVID-19 infection as directed by the WHO (Caliendo *et al.*, 2022), however, the diagnostic process of Long COVID remains limited and not yet well structured. Long COVID, also termed Post COVID-19 condition or Post-Acute Sequelae of COVID-19 (PASC), is said to occur 3 months post-COVID onset in patients' and the symptoms last for at least 2 months and may persist for up to 8 months, without any alternative diagnosis being able to explain them (Nalbandian *et al.*, 2021). The most common symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath, cognitive dysfunction, as well as others which impair normal, everyday function (Nalbandian *et al.*, 2021; WHO., 2021). These symptoms may be continued from initial COVID-19 illness, or new onset following recovery from COVID-19, these symptoms may fluctuate and may also relapse (WHO., 2021). It is well known that people with chronic conditions and other risk factors including, high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking and others, are more susceptible to both contracting COVID-19 and suffering more serious side effects due to the virus (Sanyaolu *et al.*, 2020), with these risk factors also linked to long-term effects. Long COVID was not identified as an issue early in the COVID-19 pandemic, but over the past year, it has become evident that it is required to be treated as a chronic condition and will have lasting effects on the healthcare system. It is now evident that COVID-19 isn't going away, with more and more patients who suffered acute COVID-19 symptoms now plagued by long term side effects, thus, understanding the signs, symptoms and potential treatment options for Long COVID becoming more important.

AIM

To understand the extent and type of evidence available in relation to Long COVID, symptom presentation, associated disease risk and models of care and how this can be implemented in South Africa.

METHODS

A scoping review was performed in accordance with PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis). A search strategy was developed using PubMed and was fixed across all databases. We searched Cochrane, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar for articles related to Long COVID from 2020 until July 2023. The search strategy included the search terms; Long COVID; Post COVID; Post COVID Syndrome; Post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 (PASC) infection. This yielded; Cochrane (n=19), PubMed (n=582), Scopus (n=82), Google Scholar (n=16800). Following this we were able to ascertain the number of studies available globally, and then focused on those in South Africa or on the South African population. Studies which were not in English, was not conducted on humans, clinical and randomized-controlled trials, and were not full-text were excluded. Various spellings of the search terms were considered. Articles included were published between 2020 and July 2023. The articles were independently reviewed in conjunction with the aim to determine its suitability for inclusion in the analysis.

RESULTS

A total of 2564 articles were identified from the four databases, Cochrane (n=0), PubMed (n=2), Scopus (n=72) and Google Scholar (n=2490). The Google Scholar articles are still being analysed for full review inclusion. The preliminary results of this review found that there is (1) a lack of studies on standardized care for Long COVID patients, (2) an overemphasis on acute COVID-19 treatment, (3) a lack of interdisciplinary approach and (4) the potential for research in Long COVID as a chronic disease.

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CONCLUSIONS

Long COVID is a growing health concern, affecting a multitude of people who had been previously diagnosed with acute COVID and suffered either mild, moderate, or severe symptoms. Persistent symptoms pose a health concern for both the health system, and the patients. Furthermore, this review is part of an ongoing study which aims to assess Long COVID in primary health care clinics. The results of which will contribute directly to our understanding of the effects of Long COVID, and current treatment strategies on patient care, longevity of care, potential risk for future disease and its effects on the health care system long term. This is especially important in a South African context given that we do not have a standard model of care for Long COVID, our system is resource scarce, with patients presenting at later stages.

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