

DL Hot Issues Brief

Potential for increased media attention regarding “long COVID” and Queensland Health’s research

14 March 2024

Issue

- There is potential for increased media attention on “long COVID”. This is a result of Queensland Health’s research that compared ongoing symptoms and functional impairment one year after COVID-19 with outcomes one year after influenza or other respiratory illnesses.
- The findings will be presented at the European Congress for Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ECCMID) to be held in Barcelona, Spain, in April 2024. The ECCMID press team has issued an advance press release about this study, and at the time of writing the ABC has prepared a story for publication on 15 March 2024.
- Queensland Health’s research found that “long COVID” appears to be a post-viral syndrome indistinguishable from that following influenza and other respiratory illnesses. However, it may have appeared to be a distinct and severe illness because of higher case numbers of COVID-19 during the pandemic.
- As a result, the Chief Health Officer, Dr John Gerrard, has stated that the use of terms like “long COVID” should cease, because they wrongly imply there is something unique and exceptional about longer term symptoms associated with this virus.
- This is consistent with changes in terminology where “long COVID” is increasingly referred to as “post-acute sequelae of COVID-19” (PASC).
- Similarly, the British Medical Journal published an important review of “long COVID” research, finding it was plagued with poor methodologies resulted in an overstating of the risk and reports of high prevalence. These are reported by the media and increase public concern and anxiety. The review also states the term “long COVID” connotes a permanent or long-term condition when the vast majority fully recover.

Background

- Queensland Health’s research compared outcomes one year after PCR-confirmed COVID-19 with outcomes one year after a different respiratory illness (PCR-confirmed influenza infection, or a PCR test that was negative to COVID-19 and influenza). All participants were symptomatic at the time of the PCR test.
- After 12 months, 16 per cent of respondents with COVID-19 reported some ongoing symptoms. Similarly, 16 per cent of patients with other respiratory infections also reported some ongoing symptoms at 12 months.
- The COVID-19 patients with moderate-to-severe functional impairment (“Long COVID”) recorded rates of 3 per cent, compared with 4.1 per cent for the participants who had respiratory symptoms that were not COVID related.
- In addition, the study asked participants to describe their ongoing symptoms one year later. For those with moderate-to-severe functional impairment, there was also no difference between these groups when they described the symptoms commonly associated with “long COVID”: fatigue, post exertion symptom exacerbation, brain fog, and changes to smell and taste.

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DLT Member / HSCE: Dr John Gerrard
Position: Chief Health Officer
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Date: 14 March 2024

- This research builds on other Queensland Health research that was published in the British Medical Journal last year and found no difference between COVID-19 and influenza symptoms after 3 months.
- When COVID-19 restrictions were eased in Queensland in early 2022, over 90 per cent of the population was vaccinated upon its exposure to the milder Omicron variant. As a result, international experiences of COVID-19 and reports of “long COVID” are not relevant to the Australian context.
- The rates of this post-viral syndrome across Australia are low. Research in the Lancet suggested that, for a highly vaccinated population during the Omicron wave, 2 per cent of hospitalised and 0.09 per cent of non-hospitalised adults develop “long COVID”.
- There is no definitive diagnosis or objective test for “long COVID”. Instead, it requires the elimination of other potential conditions and explanations.
- Current health advice is that people should speak with their GP in the first instance if they have concerns about “long COVID”.
- There remains low demand for “long COVID” services. Queensland Health’s GP Long COVID Focus Group has recently confirmed:
 - Rates of this illness remain low across the State; and
 - Patients can be effectively managed in primary care, with onward referral to a specialist based on an individual’s symptoms (as per any other illness).

Actions to date

- The Office of the Chief Health Officer continues to work closely with the Media and Communications team. Both reviewed and edited the press release from ECCMID and the ABC news story (yet to be published).
- Queensland Health has a number of resources available about this illness for primary care clinicians and the public. These have been shared widely with health networks.
- Queensland Health’s webpage to support people with concerns is called “Your recovery from COVID-19”. It includes resources where people can self-manage their ongoing symptoms as well as advice to speak with their GP if they have concerns.
- Queensland Health has also published advice to clinicians to support patients experiencing “long COVID”. In addition, clinicians can access their relevant HealthPathways website for guidance and advice on managing patients

Media response

- A media holding statement is not required.

Confidential

- The Metro South Hospital and Health Service runs the only state-funded “long COVID” service. From March 2022 to December 2023 inclusive, this service accepted 65 referrals from a catchment of over a million people.

Contact person

Matthew Brown, Consultant Public Health Officer, Office of the Chief Health Officer,

s.73 - Irrelevant information

news

From: [Redacted]
Sent: Thursday, 14 March 2024 6:39 PM
To: news
Subject: RE: [Redacted] - Long COVID study - TV interview

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

Categories: Connor/Keith, Emilee

Hi Emilee – no problem at all, thank you for letting me know!

Is there a more recent statement from the Department for this study or shall I use the quotes in the media release?

Thanks,

[Redacted]

From: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2024 6:32 PM
To: [Redacted]
Cc: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Subject: RE: [Redacted] - Long COVID study - TV interview

Hi again [Redacted]

Thanks for that chat.

I've followed up and we won't have anyone available tomorrow morning at that time, unfortunately.

Happy for your weekend producers to chase, or to be kept as an option for next week.

Apologies again, and if anything changes tomorrow, we'll let you know.

Thanks
Emilee



Media Unit
 Strategic Communication Branch | Queensland Health

P [Redacted]
E news@health.qld.gov.au
W health.qld.gov.au
A 33 Charlotte St, Brisbane

From: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 14 March 2024 4:56 PM

To: [Redacted]
Cc: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Subject: RE: [Redacted] - Long COVID study - TV interview

Hi [Redacted]

Just tried to give you a call.

We're looking into your request and will get back to you soon, noting that the release is embargoed.

Thanks
Emilee



Media Unit

Strategic Communication Branch | Queensland Health

P [Redacted]
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A 33 Charlotte St, Brisbane

From: [Redacted]
Sent: Thursday, 14 March 2024 2:44 PM
To: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Subject: [Redacted] - Long COVID study - TV interview

To Queensland Health,

We're hoping to interview a researcher involved in the Long COVID study embargoed until tomorrow on our show.

It'd be via our [Redacted] in Brisbane at 7:10am (QLD time), live for 5 minutes with one of our hosts – either [Redacted]

I've attached a copy of the media release for the study.

Feel free to call me to discuss this interview and timings – I'm on [Redacted]

Regards,

[Redacted]

news

From: s.73 - Irrelevant information
Sent: Thursday, 14 March 2024 9:46 PM
To: news
Subject: Re: Radio interview, Health Report, Long Covid

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

Categories: Connor/Keith, Emilee

Thanks for getting back to me Emilee,

We'll leave it to those other programs for now, I think it'll be too far after the fact for us by next week.

Cheers,

s.73 - Irrelevant information

From: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2024 6:13:21 PM
To: s.73 - Irrelevant information
Cc: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Radio interview, Health Report, Long Covid

Hi Rebecca

Thanks for your email and apologies for the delay.

We're looking into your request and will get back to you, noting we've also had multiple ABC teams reach out to us already.

Thanks
Emilee



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From: s.73 - Irrelevant information
Sent: Thursday, 14 March 2024 12:13 PM
To: news <news@health.qld.gov.au>
Subject: Radio interview, Health Report, Long Covid

Good afternoon,

I'm hoping to arrange an interview with a lead author of the study into long covid, and it being indistinguishable from other post viral syndromes a year after infection.

The interview would be with s.73 - Irrelevant information it would be a pre-record and we can do that via WhatsApp or Facetime (audio only) depending on preference

Many thanks,

s.73 - Irrelevant information

