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Covid-19: Symptoms are common after acute phase of disease, Italian study shows

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Almost nine out of 10 patients discharged from a Rome hospital after recovery from covid-19 were still experiencing at least one symptom two months later, a study shows.

Fatigue and shortness of breath were the most common symptoms reported in the study of 143 patients.¹ More than half of patients were still experiencing three or more symptoms.

The research, published as a letter in *JAMA*, is further evidence of a “long tail” of covid-19 related illness. On 5 July health and social care secretary Matt Hancock announced the launch of a study into the long term health effects of covid-19 on hospitalised patients in the UK. The post-hospitalisation covid-19 study aims to recruit 10 000 patients who have been hospitalised with covid-19 and will track them over a year.²

In the waning phase of the pandemic in Italy, beginning on 21 April, the Fondazione Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli hospital established a post-acute outpatient service for patients discharged from the hospital after recovering from covid-19. The mean age of the patients was 56.5 years and 63% were men. They had been in hospital for an average of 13.5 days and 72% had evidence of interstitial pneumonia. Some 15% of patients had received non-invasive ventilation and 5% had received invasive ventilation.

The patients were only included in the study if they had a negative transcriptase polymerase chain reaction test for SARS-CoV-2, indicating they were not in the acute phase of the illness.

When patients were assessed a mean of 60 days after onset of the first covid-19 symptoms, only 18 (12.6%) were completely free of any covid-19 related symptom, while 32% had one or two symptoms, and 55% had three or more. None of the patients had fever or any signs or symptoms of acute illness. Worsened quality of life was reported by 44% of patients. A high proportion of patients still reported fatigue (53%), dyspnea (43%), joint pain (27%), and chest pain (22%).

The study has limitations as it is based on a single centre with a relatively small number of patients and without a control group of patients discharged for other reasons. There is also a lack of information on symptom history before acute covid-19 illness and no information on symptom severity. Furthermore, the study authors point out that patients with community acquired pneumonia can also have persistent symptoms.

1 Carfi A, Bernabei R, Landi F Gemelli Against COVID-19 Post-Acute Care Study Group, for the Gemelli Against Covid-19 Post-Acute Care Study Group. Persistent symptoms in patients after acute covid-19. *JAMA* 2020;9. doi: 10.1001/jama.2020.12603. pmid: 32644129

2 Post-hospitalisation covid-19 study. www.phosp.org.

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