

The Crucial Role of Post-COVID Clinics in Addressing Long-Term Health Impacts

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As the world continues to emerge from the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus is gradually shifting from immediate containment and treatment to addressing the lingering effects that the virus has left on millions of people. One critical aspect of this transition is the establishment of post-COVID clinics, which are essential for providing comprehensive care to those suffering from long-term symptoms, commonly referred to as “long COVID”.¹

The need for post-COVID clinics is underscored by the growing recognition that recovery from COVID-19 is not always linear or swift. While many patients recover completely within a few weeks, a significant number experience persistent symptoms that can last for months or even years. These symptoms often include fatigue, shortness of breath, brain fog, chest pain, and a variety of neurological, cardiovascular, and mental health issues. Such a wide range of symptoms, varying in severity and duration, necessitates a multidisciplinary approach to care, which is precisely what post-COVID clinics are designed to offer.²

Post-COVID clinics serve as specialized centres where patients receive targeted care and management for their ongoing symptoms. These clinics bring together experts from various fields, including pulmonology, cardiology, neurology, psychiatry, and physical therapy. This collaborative model ensures that patients receive holistic care tailored to their unique needs, rather than piecemeal treatment that may overlook the interconnected nature of their symptoms.

Moreover, post-COVID clinics play a vital role in advancing our understanding of long COVID. By monitoring and treating patients over time, these clinics can gather valuable data on the prevalence, progression,

and management of post-COVID conditions. This information is crucial not only for improving patient outcomes but also for informing public health strategies and guiding future research. As new variants of the virus continue to emerge, and as we learn more about the long-term effects of COVID-19, these clinics will be at the forefront of adapting care protocols to meet evolving needs.

Though no organ is immune to the development of post-COVID issues, respiratory problems ranked number one both in terms of incidence and severity. The most common symptoms reported by the patients are ongoing breathlessness, cough, generalized fatigue, sleep disturbances, mood or cognitive changes, and upper respiratory tract symptoms including persistent rhinitis and throat irritation.³

Most of these symptoms are self-limiting in the majority of patients with or without treatment. The most dreaded post-COVID lung complication is the involvement of lung interstitium in varying degrees and pulmonary thromboembolism. Though florid interstitial lung disease secondary to COVID is rare, around one in four patients may present with abnormal chest radiographs and one in five may present with significant desaturation while undergoing six-minute walk test at three months of infection. Severe acute COVID-19, prolonged duration of hospitalization, history of ICU admission, invasive mechanical ventilation and obesity are found to be associated with severe post-COVID lung symptoms.⁴ Apart from these, a history of smoking, the presence of comorbidities and low socio-economic status also add to the burden of post-COVID lung complications. As the morbidity burden is being shifted from COVID to post-COVID there is a need for better management of complications

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and to streamline health care resources. Recognition of symptoms and signs of respiratory involvement at an early stage will help to reduce irreversible lung damage by instituting appropriate management strategies.

In addition to providing medical care, post-COVID clinics offer much-needed psychological support. The uncertainty and frustration of dealing with persistent symptoms can take a significant toll on mental health. Anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are not uncommon among long COVID patients.⁵ The integrated care model of post-COVID clinics ensures that mental health professionals are available to support patients, helping them cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of their recovery journey.

The establishment of post-COVID clinics is not merely a response to an immediate healthcare need; it is a proactive measure to mitigate long-term public health consequences. Without proper care, the burden of long COVID could strain healthcare systems, reduce workforce productivity, and diminish the quality of life for countless individuals. Governments, healthcare institutions, and communities must recognize the importance of these clinics and ensure they are adequately funded and accessible to all who need them.

In conclusion, as we move forward in the post-pandemic era, establishing and expanding post-COVID clinics should be a priority. These clinics are indispensable in providing the comprehensive care needed to address the multifaceted challenges of long COVID.⁶

By investing in these specialized centres, we can better support those affected, improve overall public health, and ensure that the lessons learned from this pandemic

translate into a more resilient healthcare system for the future.

END NOTE

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