

Physical therapy for long COVID: Research shows patients benefit

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Credit: Anna Shvets from Pexels

Studies show that those suffering from long COVID may benefit from physical therapy services as soon as they are able to tolerate physical activity, a PCOM Georgia assistant professor, who specializes in

cardiopulmonary physical therapy, said.

Patients who have long COVID present with an abundance of symptoms resulting in functional deficits associated with cardiopulmonary, musculoskeletal, neuromuscular, and, in some cases cognitive deficits. These symptoms result in a significant functional decline impacting quality of life.

Alaina Bell, PT, DPT, who is a board-certified specialist in cardiopulmonary physical therapy, says that [recent research](#) reports that [physical therapists](#) are directly involved in the treatment of long COVID symptoms across all settings, including inpatient, acute care and outpatient environments.

A [study](#) by the American Physical Therapy Association indicates that physical therapy services can improve outcomes related to cardiopulmonary and musculoskeletal system impairments and quality of life in patients experiencing the effects of long COVID, which consists of "signs, symptoms, and conditions that continue to develop after acute COVID-19 infection. These conditions can last weeks, months or years," according to the CDC.

Advantages of a multidisciplinary approach

"I believe that treatment outcomes for all patients are maximized with a multidisciplinary team approach," Dr. Bell said. Physical therapists can provide individualized [rehabilitation programs](#) to those with long COVID.

"For example," she continued, "we can teach them how to manage fatigue to improve [exercise tolerance](#), provide targeted breathing exercises to strengthen muscles of respiration, improve lung capacity, and enhance overall strength, flexibility, and mobility."

[The CDC reports](#) that long COVID typically affects those with severe COVID-19 illness requiring admission to a hospital [intensive care unit](#), those who are immunocompromised with underlying [health conditions](#), and the unvaccinated. In addition to adults, long COVID can affect both children and adolescents.

"Physical therapists have unique skills, making them key multidisciplinary team members facilitating the patient's return to optimal function both during their [hospital stay](#) and after discharge," Bell said.

What is pulmonary rehabilitation?

Pulmonary rehabilitation, which focuses on the cardiopulmonary system, may be performed by either a physical therapist or a respiratory therapist. According to studies published in [UC Davis Health News](#) and by the [American Physical Therapy Association](#), strengthening exercises, aerobic training, and stretching help to return patients to their prior level of function.

The [studies indicate](#) that the focus is on breathing retraining to improve ventilation, coughing techniques to improve secretion clearance, and exercises to improve both diaphragmatic strength and muscles assisting in respiration.

"Research supports the initiation of early physical therapy to promote functional mobility, decrease medical complications associated with bed rest, and return the patient to their prior level of function," Bell said.

She added, "Georgia is a direct access state, allowing patients to seek outpatient physical therapy services without a physician referral. Patients with long COVID can use physical therapy services to improve their symptoms and quality of life."

Provided by Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

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