

Heart Health Concerns Post-COVID Infection

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PEORIA - When COVID-19 first began its spread around the globe, it was mainly viewed as a devastating respiratory disease. Ventilator shortages made headlines. Patients described symptoms like difficulty breathing, or feeling like they were choking.

As we continue to learn more about COVID-19's lasting effects on the body, however, we now understand it impacts so much more than our lungs.

One major area of concern for those infected or recovering is the heart. Case studies of COVID-19 patients have shown increased incidents of heart attacks; myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle); heart failure; or even cardiogenic shock, a condition in which your heart suddenly can't pump enough blood to meet your body's needs, which is usually caused by a severe heart attack.

“One thing that makes COVID distinct is that it has a propensity to cause inflammation in both small and large blood vessels. And that can lead to dangerous things like heart attacks, blood clots, and in some cases can impair the blood flow to the heart muscle,” explains Dr. Chris Sparrow, an OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute Cardiologist specializing in heart failure.

Dr. Sparrow says it appears patients who have heart complications due to COVID-19 have a more difficult time recovering, and need to pay close attention to symptoms during the recovery process.

“It's very common after COVID infection to have symptoms like fatigue; palpitations, or racing, heartbeat; chest pain and shortness of breath, and often these symptoms can last for weeks to months. That can be relatively normal,” he explains. “In general, the things to worry about are any new symptoms or worsening symptoms. So if you're starting to feel better or you're recovering, and then you develop new, severe, or worsening chest pain, or shortness of breath, or you start to have this sensation of a rabbit or racing heartbeat, you should either call your doctor or seek attention immediately.”

If your symptoms are not severe but you still have cardiac concerns, Dr. Sparrow says a cardiologist doesn't need to be your first stop, especially if you've never had heart problems before and are not at risk for heart disease.

“In general, if you've had COVID-19 and you did not have any heart symptoms at the time of infection and have no symptoms now, no routine testing is recommended. In some cases, your physician may recommend an electrocardiogram, or an echocardiogram or ultrasound of the heart, depending on what symptoms you did experience or are experiencing now.”

Dr. Sparrow adds that anyone recovering from severe COVID-19 should be patient with their recovery, and not expect a rapid return to normal activity levels.

While we have a much better understanding of COVID-19 and its impact on the heart, there is still a lot to learn. New studies are underway and more information is learned

daily. In the meantime, says Dr. Sparrow, a regular yearly check-up with a primary care physician is recommended for anyone, especially someone who has recovered from a COVID-19 infection.

“COVID-19 tends to cause inflammation in the blood vessels. Coincidentally, that is part of the process that leads to atherosclerosis, which is the disease process that leads to heart attacks and strokes. So we don't know what the long term ramifications of COVID are going to be on heart conditions. However, it's important for your physician to be evaluating you on an annual basis to look for those signs of cardiovascular disease that may or may not be more common after COVID-19 infection,” he says.

The best way to prevent severe COVID-19 complications is to avoid infection and severe illness. OSF HealthCare believes vaccination against COVID-19 is our greatest tool to protect the population and help end the pandemic.

For information about vaccination clinics for the 5-11 age group, or to schedule a COVID-19 vaccine or booster, visit osfhealthcare.org/vaccine.