



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Fog Lingers for Some After COVID-19 Recovery

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **The COVID-19 pandemic has had long-lasting health effects for between 50 percent of those infected, even after they recover from the initial illness, according to research published in the journal JAMA Network Open. The phenomenon is called post-acute sequelae of SARS CoV-2 infection (PASC) or long COVID. Today, we look at the effects of long COVID on the brain.***

Whether they experienced severe symptoms or not, some COVID patients are suffering long-term effects of the virus. PASC or long COVID is described as an array of symptoms that may emerge four to eight weeks after the original illness has subsided. The condition that may include symptoms of the original COVID, such as shortness of breath and fatigue, as well as potential new symptoms: chest discomfort, severe pain, gastrointestinal distress, dizziness, post exertional malaise, and brain fog.

Brain fog is of particular interest to us here at the Brain Health Initiative. Between 20 and 30 percent of COVID patients describe their symptoms of brain fog as slow or sluggish thinking, difficulty concentrating, getting lost easily, general confusion, new challenges with reading or math, brief pauses in brain functioning, they can't think of a specific word, and are unusually forgetful. Brain fog is not a new phenomenon, and can have several causes, including sleep deprivation, the side effects of medications, chemotherapy, a concussion or eating the wrong foods (e.g., refined carbohydrates or low-fat diets). Usually, brain fog is temporary and clears on its own.

But persistent brain fog, like that experienced by PASC/long COVID sufferers, has several negative effects on brain performance including energy, stamina, and controlling emotions, as well as, cognition, the brain processes that allow us to think, read, learn, remember, reason, and pay attention. Cognitive difficulties in long COVID sufferers can affect:

- **Attention.** The brain's ability to process what is happening around you without being distracted by other details.
- **Memory.** The brain's ability to learn, store, retain, and retrieve information.
- **Executive function.** The brain's ability to plan, focus, juggle multiple tasks, and remember instructions.
- **Processing speed.** The time between receiving and responding to visual, auditory, or physical stimuli. The time it takes a person to perform a task.

But why it happens in long COVID sufferers is unclear. According to a [Harvard Health report](#), COVID can cause damage to the brain through direct infection, by causing strokes, and by depriving the brain of oxygen. How about patients who experience less severe symptoms? Further research is needed, across all age groups, and no matter how mild or severe the acute COVID illness. Better understanding may ultimately help guide care.

What should PASC /long COVID sufferers do if they are experiencing brain fog? It's important to report lingering symptoms with a doctor, who has experience in treating brain fog and PASC patients. Don't forget to mention other neurologic symptoms, like weakness, numbness, tingling, pain, or loss of smell or taste. Research is ongoing to discover the causes of long-term brain fog, and new care guidelines are on the horizon.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

There are things you can do to help clear long COVID-related brain fog. In a [Harvard Health report](#), Cognitive Behavioral Neurologist Andrew E. Budson, MD, and BHI recommend:

- **GET A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT.** See a cognitive neurologist or neuropsychologist that has expertise in assessing and treating patients with brain fog and PASC.
- **GET YOUR HEART PUMPING.** If you are not also experiencing post-exertional malaise, working up to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise per day, five days per week, is the goal to boost brain health. Consistent routines of gentle Yoga, stretching, pilates and swimming also offer promise to support recovery.
- **EAT HEALTHY.** A Mediterranean-style diet of olive oil, fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fish, and nuts and beans can improve thinking, memory and brain health.
- **DON'T DRINK OR TAKE DRUGS.** Avoid substances that can get in the way of brain healing.
- **GET YOUR REST.** The brain and body need sleep to clear out toxins and heal. Sleep when you need to.
- **BE SOCIAL.** Spending time with friends and family has been shown to benefit mood and enhance thinking and memory.
- **STIMULATE YOUR MIND.** Pursue activities such as listening to music and mindfulness exercises and keep a positive mindset.
- **SAY NO WHEN YOU NEED TO.** There is a fine line between stretching your brain and body during recovery and straining your brain and body, which can cause delay and regression in the healing process.

- **PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH.** Further research is needed to ultimately help guide care. BHI will be collaborating on studies to follow PASC patients longitudinally. Are you interested in learning more? [Get Involved](#).

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).