"I feel like I Have Dementia': Brain Fog Plagues Covid Survivors

The condition is affecting thousands of patients, impeding their ability to work and function in daily life.

After contracting the coronavirus in March, Michael Reagan lost all memory of his 12-day vacation in Paris, even though the trip was just a few weeks earlier.

Several weeks after Erica Taylor recovered from her Covid-19 symptoms of nausea and cough, she became confused and forgetful, failing to even recognize her own car, the only Toyota Prius in her apartment complex's parking lot.

Lisa Mizelle, a veteran nurse practitioner at an urgent care clinic who fell ill with the virus in July, finds herself forgetting routine treatments and lab tests, and has to ask colleagues about terminology she used to know automatically.

"I leave the room and I can't remember what the patient just said," she said, adding that if she hadn't exhausted her medical leave she'd take more time off.

"It scares me to think I'm working," Ms. Mizelle, 53, said. "I feel like I have dementia."

It's becoming known as Covid brain fog: troubling cognitive symptoms that can include memory loss, confusion, difficulty focusing, dizziness and grasping for everyday words. Increasingly, Covid survivors say brain fog is impairing their ability to work and function normally.

"There are thousands of people who have that," said Dr. Igor Koralnik, chief of neuro-infectious disease at Northwestern Medicine in Chicago, who has already seen hundreds of survivors at a post-Covid clinic he leads. "The impact on the work force that's affected is going to be significant."

Scientists aren't sure what causes brain fog, which varies widely and affects even people who became only mildly physically ill from Covid-19 and had no previous medical conditions. Leading theories are that it arises when the body's immune response to the virus doesn't shut down or from inflammation in blood vessels leading to the brain.

Confusion, delirium and other types of altered mental function, called encephalopathy, have occurred during hospitalization for Covid-19 respiratory problems, and a study found such patients needed longer hospitalizations and often couldn't manage daily activities right after hospitalization.

But research on long-lasting brain fog is just beginning. A French report in August on 120 patients who had been hospitalized found that 34 percent had memory loss and 27 percent had concentration problems months later.

In a soon-to-be-published survey of 3,930 members of Survivor Corps, a group of people who have connected to discuss life after Covid, over half reported difficulty concentrating or focusing, said Natalie Lambert, an associate research professor at Indiana University School of Medicine, who helped lead the study. It was the fourth most common symptom out of the 101 long-term and short-term physical, neurological and psychological conditions that survivors reported. Memory problems, dizziness or confusion were reported by a third or more respondents.

Experts advise people with brain fog to see doctors to rule out other medical conditions and treat remaining physical symptoms.

Doctors don't know whether symptoms will improve or evaporate with time. Some patients are devising workarounds or makeshift recovery exercises.

Adapted from the New York Times, published on October 11th, 2020.

Glossary:

Plague (verb): to disturb or annoy persistently

Medical leave: authorized especially extended absence from employment for medical reasons

Impair: to weaken or make worse

Devise: create, invent

Workaround: alternative solution

Makeshift: temporary

Read the text and say if these sentences are True (T) or False (F):

1. Michael's holidays in Paris were a short time ago. ____

2. Only Erica's car was parked in the parking lot. ____

3. Lisa can't remember some basic work-related vocabulary. ____

4. Lisa would like to take more time off work. ____

5. Nausea is one of the symptoms of brain fog. ____

6. Lots of people who caught Covid suffer from brain fog. ____

7. Brain fog only affects patients with previous medical conditions. ____

8. The French report showed that 27% of the patients had memory loss. ____

9. The Survivors Corps survey has just been published. ____

10. Doctors are uncertain about the disappearance of the symptoms. ____