



Message from the Tonic Media Network Editorial Committee*

Welcome to another edition of *Practice Connect* with topical news and information for you and your patients.

Healthy lifestyles and Long COVID

Most people with COVID-19 recover completely within a few weeks of their first symptoms. However, some people may experience longer-term effects from their infection.

Long COVID is described by the World Health Organisation as an illness occurring after a COVID-19 infection which lasts for at least two months. It is sometimes characterised by symptoms like fatigue, breathing problems, difficulty with concentration or memory and a persistent cough (although the symptoms can differ significantly between people). For a list of possible Long COVID symptoms visit <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/testing-positive/long-covid>

A significant minority of those who became ill with COVID during the pandemic found they had long-lasting symptoms and while many recover, it's a condition best avoided.

What factors shape one's risk of Long-COVID?

One [major paper](#) gathered data from a long-running study of nurses to find out. Data on the general health of the nurses had been recorded in 2017, including 'healthy lifestyle factors' – things like whether they slept more than eight hours a night, didn't smoke, did vigorous physical exercise each week and had moderate to no alcohol consumption. The study also tracked who had been infected with COVID-19, which turned out to be almost 2000 people,

By looking at which of those 2000 people went on to develop Long COVID, the researchers could analyse the effect of healthy lifestyle factors. They found a significant, dose-dependent relationship between healthy lifestyle and a reduced risk of COVID-19, so much so that people with five or six healthy lifestyle factors were half as likely to get Long COVID as those with none. The more 'healthy' you were by this study's measurement, the lower your risk became.

While you cannot retrospectively engineer a healthy lifestyle to prevent Long COVID, this study may help in identifying people at particular risk of developing long-term symptoms. It highlights the importance of exercise, eating well and regular sleep.

According to the Australian Department of Health, Long COVID is more likely to occur in people who:

- are unvaccinated
- had severe COVID-19, including those who were hospitalised or needed intensive care
- had underlying conditions or disease prior to COVID-19, such as high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, and obesity.

Inquiry into Long COVID and repeated COVID infections

In Australia an inquiry into Long COVID and repeated COVID-19 infections is underway in Federal Parliament. Australia's Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly said a national plan is being developed and will be finalised when the parliamentary inquiry concludes and the committee has given its advice.

Helping patients with Long COVID

In the meantime, General Practitioners can continue to ask patients about their symptoms and the impact they are having on the patient's life. GPs may suggest some tests to identify possible causes of symptoms and rule out other conditions.

According to the Australian Department of Health other advice GPs can provide patients includes:

- monitoring and managing symptoms at home, such as through use of a [symptom diary](#)
- symptoms that might require medical care (such as new or worsening symptoms, especially if respiratory or potentially cardiac in origin) and where to seek care if you experience these symptoms
- what to expect in the weeks and months following COVID-19
- supports for lifestyle interventions, such as nutrition, physical activity and counselling.

Long COVID clinics

Some states and territories including the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria have opened Long COVID clinics in major cities to help people recover from ongoing symptoms.

Poor sleep linked to heart health issues

A good night's sleep empowers the body to recover and lets a person wake up refreshed and ready to take on the day. Unfortunately, many people have sleep problems and don't get the rest they need. Poor sleep can seriously affect a person's quality of life and increase the risk of developing chronic health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare nearly half (48%) of all Australian adults report at least 2 sleep-related problems.

Poor quality sleep can increase a person's risk of heart disease and premature death by up to seven years, according to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Sydney and the University of Southern Denmark.

The [study](#) examined data from over 300,000 adults in the UK Biobank, a large-scale biomedical database and research resource, containing in-depth genetic and health information from half a million UK participants. It found that different types of sleep disturbances can lead to varied spans of compromised heart health. The researchers developed what they called a "composite sleep score" which included information like a person's sleep duration, whether or not they snored, their daytime sleepiness, insomnia complaints, and whether they were an early bird or night owl, to create three categories: poor, intermediate, and healthy sleep. They compared this to the participants' overall cardiovascular disease-free health expectancy.

Men and women with sleep-related breathing disorders (such as sleep apnea) on average lost more than seven years of cardiovascular disease-free life. But even general poor sleep was found to typically result in a loss of about two years of normal heart health in men and women. The study showed that women with poor sleep are likely to experience two years more of compromised cardiovascular health compared to healthy sleepers, while men experience more than two years. People who fell into the 'intermediate' sleep category lost almost one year of heart disease-free life if they were female, while males lost slightly more.

This research also emphasised that snoring, in conjunction with difficulty sleeping, could be a warning sign of other potential health issues in the future. The authors say it's essential to prioritise sleep quality to reduce the risk of heart disease and other health problems.

Non-pharmacological therapies

According to myDr.com.au there are several non-pharmacological therapies that people can try to improve their sleep quality including:

- Relaxation therapies
- Psychological therapy
- Complementary medicines

For more information including tips to improve sleep habits visit <https://mydr.com.au/first-aid-self-care/insomnia/>

Useful resource

How Much Sleep Is Enough? Eight hours good, six hours bad? It's not just down to numbers, says Dr Norman Swan, who prescribes a fresh focus on sleep quality over quantity for life enhancing rest.

<https://mydr.com.au/sleep/how-much-sleep-is-enough/>

Tips for preparing your practice for flu season

With flu season fast approaching, it's essential that General Practices are prepared for the upcoming flu season. General practice plays a critical role in ensuring that patients, especially vulnerable patients and practice staff are vaccinated against influenza.

The following outlines the steps you can take to help ensure your practice is prepared for flu season this year.

Identifying patients who are eligible to receive the government-funded flu vaccine

Knowing how many patients in your clinic are eligible to receive the government-funded flu vaccine is crucial to a well-managed flu season. It dictates how many vaccines you will need to order, and the amount of nursing and practice hours you will need to dedicate to your flu clinic in order to effectively deliver the vaccine.

Patients eligible to receive the flu vaccine under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) include:

- Children aged 6 months to under 5 years
- People aged 65 years or over
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 6 months and over
- Pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy
- People aged 6 months or over who have a medical condition that is associated with an increased risk of influenza disease complications

Identifying these patients from your patient cohort can be a challenging and time-consuming task. It often involves a lot of manual reporting, from running various SQL queries (if you know how) or trawling over your appointment book or waiting lists.

Your time is better spent improving practice processes and ensuring that your patients receive the best care possible. Utilising reporting tools such as Cubiko can help streamline your vaccination clinic, by looking at historical data to help you easily identify patients who may be eligible to receive the government funded vaccine. You can give these lists to your practitioners who can then assess their patient's eligibility, and you can work together to ensure that the patient comes back to the practice to receive their vaccine.

Determining the demand for private flu vaccines at your practice

The next step in preparing for flu season is to estimate how many patients at your practice may want to receive the flu vaccine, but do not qualify for a government funded vaccine. Similarly, without the proper reporting tools this can be a challenging and time-consuming exercise involving manual reporting, SQL queries or going through previously raised invoices.

Solutions such as Cubiko remove the need for manual reporting by providing you with a list of patients who may want the private flu vaccine, and details of any upcoming appointments such as when their last vaccine was received.

Managing your vaccine supply and flu clinic

For many practices knowing how many doses of the government funded and private flu vaccine to order is often guesswork and based on numbers from the previous flu season. All practices monitor and record their flu vaccines in such varied ways, that there is no specific process to determine how your flu clinic went last year. Whether you are manually looking back at last years appointments trying to pinpoint which of your item 3's were flu related, or pulling an SQL report based on appointment type, it is a huge task to undertake, especially for incoming practice managers.

For the 1,000+ practices using Cubiko the process is simpler. Cubiko pulls data from your patient's vaccination record in BP to provide you with a full list of patients who received the flu vaccine (private or government funded) last flu season. These insights can be used to analyse your patient numbers early in the year, to help you understand how many flu vaccines you'll need to order and look ahead for your flu clinics staffing and logistics.

Logistically, you need to ensure that your vaccine fridges can accommodate the number of vaccines you've ordered.

Using historical data, look at what your staffing requirements were from the last flu season. This data can help you better determine the staffing requirements you need for the upcoming flu season, and who from your team may be best at delivering the vaccines.

Patient outreach

You've identified patients who may be eligible for the NIP vaccine or wish to receive the private vaccine. You've estimated the number of vaccines you need to order for the upcoming flu season, and your team's capacity to run the flu clinic. Now you need to get patients in for their flu vaccination appointments.

Every practice is different in how they approach patient outreach for their vaccination clinic. Some have a running list of patients who have expressed their interest in a flu vaccine for this flu season, and systematically work their way through the list. Again, this is quite a manual process, and often by the time you make your way through the list the patient has probably already received the flu vaccination.

If you have Cubiko these lists are already generated for you, with a de-identified Best Practice ID. Upload these lists or a portion of these lists to your chosen online appointment vendor (such as HotDoc or Automed) and send out an SMS broadcast advising your patients that you've received your vaccine supply and ready to start booking patients in for appointments. These lists can also be used in case of 'emergency' or last-minute changes to your flu vaccination clinics, such as a Doctor or Nurse

is away and cannot cover the sessions, or there is an outage of your fridge. You can easily download lists of patients scheduled for an appointment today and contact them to reschedule.

Ready to learn how you can streamline your flu season processes?

If you're interested in learning more about how Cubiko can help you this flu season, [book in a demo](#) with one of our friendly team.

Smoking rose during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a stressful time, with many people stuck at home for extended periods. We know this led to an increase in some unhealthy behaviours, like increased alcohol use and online gambling – and now new findings suggest smoking and nicotine use also increased during that time.

New [research](#) analysed data from the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program, which covers about half the country. It showed that the consumption of tobacco and nicotine had been decreasing in Australia until the COVID-19 pandemic hit (since the 1970s according to the Cancer Council NSW). The researchers believe that the pandemic disrupted this trend temporarily. The increase in nicotine consumption was highest in the first half of 2020, which coincided with Australia's first wave of COVID-19 cases. The authors argue people may have smoked or vaped more while working from home or managing higher stress levels due to public health measures like lockdowns and social distancing.

The research found that nicotine use decreased again as COVID-19 restrictions eased but remained higher than pre-pandemic levels. The uncertainties during the early months of the pandemic may have had a detrimental impact on quitting activity, as people may have resorted to smoking to alleviate their anxiety during times of extreme stress.

The researchers warn that smoking can cause higher morbidity and mortality risks when compounded with COVID-19 in Australia, so it's important to reduce the number of people smoking by supporting quit efforts. It may mean GPs should also consider checking in with patients who had previously quit or have a prior history of smoking.

Useful resource

Quit smoking: 10 tips <https://mydr.com.au/addictions/quit-smoking-10-tips/>

Decluttering key to reducing falls in the elderly

Each year slips, trips and falls cause thousands of preventable injuries. Falls are a major cause of injury for older people. A new [Cochrane review](#) found that decluttering and reducing hazards around the home can significantly reduce the risk of falls for older people by around one quarter.

The review analysed 22 studies, including data on more than 8,000 older people living in the community. It found that taking measures to reduce fall hazards around the home lowered the overall rate of falls by 26 per cent. The measures typically included an assessment of fall hazards and recommendations for lowering the risk by an occupational therapist, such as removing clutter and adding handrails and non-slip strips to steps. These measures had the biggest effect, reducing falls by almost 40 per cent.

The review did not find any compelling evidence for other measures to reduce falls – even commonly recommended approaches such as ensuring older people have the correct prescription glasses, special footwear or education on avoiding falls. That's not to say those interventions can't be helpful for individual people, but at the population level the study considered, there wasn't evidence those measures had an effect.

The authors highlight that while everyone can take more care about their home environment and should exercise for balance and lower limb strength, professional support from an occupational

therapist is an important intervention for many people living at home. Nearly one third of people aged 65 years and older fall each year, with most falls occurring at home. Preventing falls is an important way of helping people remain healthy and independent as they grow older, as repeated falls can be a sign of the need for managed care and can also mean repeated trips to the hospital, which is risky for older people.

Useful resource

Falls and the elderly: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/falls>

Could music be the key to unlocking memories?

What was your favourite song growing up? What was the tune you danced to on your wedding day? Does a familiar melody bring you back to when you first heard it played? A [recent study](#) has found that when prompted, people from different age groups recall more personal memories via music compared to another strong evoker of memories, food.

The study included 78 adults from the UK and the US, between the ages of 18-35 and 60-80. So, it wasn't a large study, but the researchers were more interested in the in-depth analysis of each person. Participants kept a diary of memories triggered separately by music and food for several days. They noted how long they were exposed to either the music or food; what specific item triggered the memory; and how the memory made them feel.

The study found that while food-related memories were mostly associated with eating or preparing a meal, music triggered memories in more diverse situations, such as studying, cleaning or driving.

The study suggests that music may be an effective memory trigger because it can evoke autobiographical memories through a diverse range of routes. For example, a song's lyrics may remind someone of a similar situation from their life, even if the song was not heard during the original event.

The researchers believe that the study's findings provide new insights into why music may be a more effective trigger for personally valued memories than other everyday cues and believe the findings provide evidence for the power of music as an everyday memory cue, which can enhance peoples' wellbeing.

The study also found that there were no differences in the number and involuntary nature of the memories evoked between the two age groups. This suggests that music remains a key memory cue throughout our lives, even though some aspects of our memory may decline as we age. It also links with the growing body of research suggesting that music (and music therapy, especially in older people) may have benefits on our mental health and even our general wellbeing, with some smaller studies showing listening to familiar music helped to reduce depression and anxiety, decrease stress and improve social connection.

*Drs Norman Swan AM and John Aloizos AM