

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dangers of Long Covid Remain Even as Pandemic's Intensity Wanes, D.O.H. Medical Director Warns

Government / **Published On February 28, 2023 04:33 AM /**

Beverly Telesford **February 28, 2023**



Even as the severity of Covid-19 infections is declining during what Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Tai Hunte-Caesar is calling a “transitional phase of the...pandemic,” the syndrome dubbed “Long Covid” is still of serious concern.

During Monday's press briefing from Government House, Dr. Hunte-Caesar said, “Most people, whether vaccinated or not, are only experiencing mild to moderate symptoms. This is the expectation at this point in time; the milder effects on the population are the expected natural progression of disease as the virus is no longer novel to the general public.”

She announced 31 active cases in the territory, 19 of which were recorded on St. Croix, 11 on St. Thomas and one on St. John. Two of the 11 patients on St. Thomas have required hospitalization. Omicron sub-variants XBB and Q1 are responsible for some of the territory's 31 cases.

"Please remember that the bivalent vaccine is still the best protection against Covid-19, and everyone aged six months or older is urged to become vaccinated and stay boosted with the current recommended booster. If you have not become boosted with the bivalent vaccine which became available in September of 2022, you are not protected against the latest Covid-19 variants," Dr. Hunte-Caesar reminded the public.

Complacency, even in the wake of the transition from pandemic to endemic disease, is unwise, said the DOH Medical Director, as Covid-related deaths are still being reported in the territory.

Additionally, potential diagnoses of "long Covid" still lurk.

"Today, long Covid is described as a complex disease that can affect nearly every organ in your body, and is not one condition but instead possibly overlapping conditions, several overlapping conditions, with different causes and with different risk factors," said Dr. Hunte-Caesar. She reported that at least 200 symptoms of long COVID have been identified, ranging from a simple lingering cough, mild shortness of breath, and excessive tiredness, to more permanent ailments such as a heart condition or inability to concentrate, popularly dubbed "brain fog".

"Long Covid can develop as early as four weeks after the initial phase of the infection. It can be the cause of newly developed chronic conditions that affect the heart, the brain or nervous system, kidneys, lung, blood or bone marrow, or psychological or mental health disorders," the medical director informed. "It is very important to know that long Covid symptoms can relapse and recur, with progressive worsening over time, leading to possibly severe debilitating conditions or even life-threatening events for sometimes months or years after infection."

Organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, along with the World Health Organization and others, are investigating the long-covid phenomenon.

Findings thus far indicate that as many as 20 percent of those who recover from a Covid-19 infection suffer long Covid symptoms.

"According to the HHS National Research action plan on long Covid research project, one in five adult Covid-19 survivors aged 18 to 65 years, and one in four survivors age 65 and older have a health condition related to their previous Covid-19 illness," Dr. Hunte-Caesar disclosed. "A recent CDC study estimates that millions of U.S. adults have new long-term symptoms that limit their daily activities, and that women may be more severely impacted," she continued.

The major take away from all the research is that long Covid is a real condition, significantly impacting a large percentage of the U.S. population. Dr. Hunte-Caesar said that the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) is now trying to

formulate policies to improve how data is collected to provide assistance to the people affected by long Covid.

The V.I. Dept. of Health has received a disparities grant which supports increased access to healthcare.

“The VIDOH Health Disparities Office has initiated data collection, focusing on the local prevalence and impact of long Covid with the utilization of our community health workers,” Dr. Hunte-Caesar said.

The medical director said research showed “44 percent of people with long Covid indicated the inability to work at all, and 51 percent had reduced their work hours. Furthermore, it is estimated that roughly 1 million workers may be out of the workforce at any given time due to long Covid,” leading to billions in salary losses.

Compounding the potential loss of income are additional healthcare costs, brought about by the need to now manage chronic conditions.

“Covid's consequences are being felt by you in the healthcare system, the economy and society as a whole. Historically, past pandemics like the flu or polio have had long lasting impacts, not just on the nation's healthcare delivery system, but also on health care costs, health insurance,, employment and the education system, the economy and much more,” Dr. Hunte-Caesar reported.

Long Covid, she said, can be avoided by preventing the initial Covid-19 infection. She encouraged vaccination, boosting and proper sanitary practices including mask wearing and hand sanitization.

Dr. Hunte-Caesar warned “the end of Covid-19 Public Health Emergency does not mean the effects of the pandemic will not continue nor does it mean that we will not continue to experience additional active cases, hospitalizations, deaths, or the effects of long Covid.”