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# Long COVID is now a disability. What does that mean for you?

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If your COVID-19 symptoms won't go away, you may be protected under federal law.

By **Rosemary Black**  
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Many people get well from COVID-19 within a few weeks. But others have symptoms that last for many months – or even longer. For some, the symptoms go away and then return. Medical professionals have begun to refer to these cases by the patient-coined terms “long COVID,” or “long-haul COVID.” (Other names used by medical professionals include “post-acute COVID-19” and “chronic COVID.”)

The condition is hard to pin down. A review published in August identified 55 potential symptoms. The most common were fatigue, headache, attention problems, hair loss and breathing problems.

In certain cases, symptoms of long COVID can be severe. For some people, they make it difficult or even impossible to hold down a job. So in July, the federal government published guidance for treating long COVID as a disability.

That means long-haulers are protected by law under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you have long COVID and are finding it hard to do your job, your employer cannot discriminate against you.

Before diving in deeper, you should know that Optum Perks may be able to help you pay for any prescriptions related to long COVID. [Download our mobile app](#) and use it to search for medication coupons for up to 80% off.

Now, here's what you should know about long COVID's new designation.

## How common is long COVID?

A review of studies from University of California Davis Health shows that roughly 1 in 4 people with COVID-19 will go on to develop symptoms of long COVID. In general, the symptoms of long COVID happen 4 weeks or more after a person first gets sick with COVID-19. In some cases, people can get long COVID even if they didn't have any initial symptoms of COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Unfortunately, vaccination does not block long COVID. “We have seen patients with long COVID who got it after a breakthrough COVID infection,” says David Putrino, PhD. He's the director of rehabilitation innovation for the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City.

That said, vaccination does help. Fully vaccinated people are about half as likely to develop long COVID, according to a study published in September. (Should you get a COVID-19 booster shot? Find out [here](#).)

## Is long COVID serious?

“Long COVID is extremely debilitating,” Putrino says. “More than 60% of these patients can no longer maintain their pre-COVID level of employment due to the severity of their symptoms.” And more than 80% of the long-COVID patients treated at his hospital for post-COVID care have self-reported memory issues, he says.

In one large study, memory problems were higher among people who'd had COVID-19 than among people who tested negative for the illness. The people in the study who reported memory problems had mild COVID. They had not been hospitalized.

The problem may be even worse for older Americans, according to the Alzheimer's Association. COVID-19 may speed the development of long-term memory problems, such as those from Alzheimer's.

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## What does it mean for long COVID to be labeled a disability?

Under the new guidelines, most employers have to make adjustments for employees with long COVID who are struggling to work. “These accommodations range from building accessibility to equipment adjustments to extended flexible work policies,” says Minesh J. Patel. He's the founder and principal attorney at the Patel Firm in Corpus Christi, Texas.

“With long COVID, you may not be able to get through a [work] day,” says Joshua Black, an employment attorney based in Phoenix. “Now that long COVID is covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, it means that your employer may need to give you more time to make decisions. If you work in a call center and take 50 calls per hour, they may need to have you just take 30 calls instead.”

If someone with long COVID asks for a reasonable accommodation, they shouldn't have to fear for their job, Patel says.

Recommended reading: [7 ways to find relief from long COVID](#)

## Could someone with long COVID get disability benefits?

It's possible that someone with long COVID could get Social Security disability benefits, says Patel. They'd have to prove that their symptoms are making it impossible to work.

But it's worth noting that these benefits don't come easy. On average, the Social Security office denies 63% of claims, according to a 2020 report.

## What should I do if I think I may qualify for accommodations at my job?

First, talk to your manager and human resources department, Patel says. “Present your case and some possible schedule and remote-work workarounds,” he advises. “These would allow you to remain in your role but give you the flexibility to work when your symptoms are more manageable.”

If you are not getting anywhere with your request, you may want to consult an employment lawyer. “This is such a new situation,” Black says. “I think most employers are trying to do the right thing, but it is still very early in the game.”

In time, hopefully your long-COVID symptoms will go away. But until then, you're protected under the ADA. And if the pandemic has made it difficult for you to pay for your health care, Optum Perks can help. Just [download our discount card](#) and present it to the pharmacist when you pick up your medication. You may be able to get an instant discount.

### Additional sources

**Symptoms of long COVID:** *Scientific Reports* (2021). [“More than 50 long-term effects of COVID-19: a systematic review and meta-analysis”](#)

**Guidance on recognizing COVID as a disability:** The United States Department of Justice, [“DOJ and HHS Issue Guidance on 'Long COVID' and Disability Rights Under the ADA”](#)

**Long COVID rates:** UC Davis Health, [“Studies show long-haul COVID-19 afflicts 1 in 4 COVID-19 patients, regardless of severity”](#)

**Long-COVID rates among vaccinated people:** *The Lancet* (2021). [“Risk factors and disease profile of post-vaccination SARS-CoV-2 infection in UK users of the COVID Symptom Study app: a prospective, community-based, nested, case-control study”](#)

**Ongoing symptoms of long COVID:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Post-COVID Conditions](#)

**Memory problems:** *Journal of the American Medical Association* (2021). [“Self-Reported Memory Problems 8 Months After Covid Infection”](#)

**Memory in older adults:** Alzheimer's Association, [Highlights from the Alzheimer's Association International Conference 2021](#)

**Social Security office denies 63% of claims:** Social Security Administration (2018). [“Annual Statistical Report on the Social Security Disability Insurance Program, 2017”](#)

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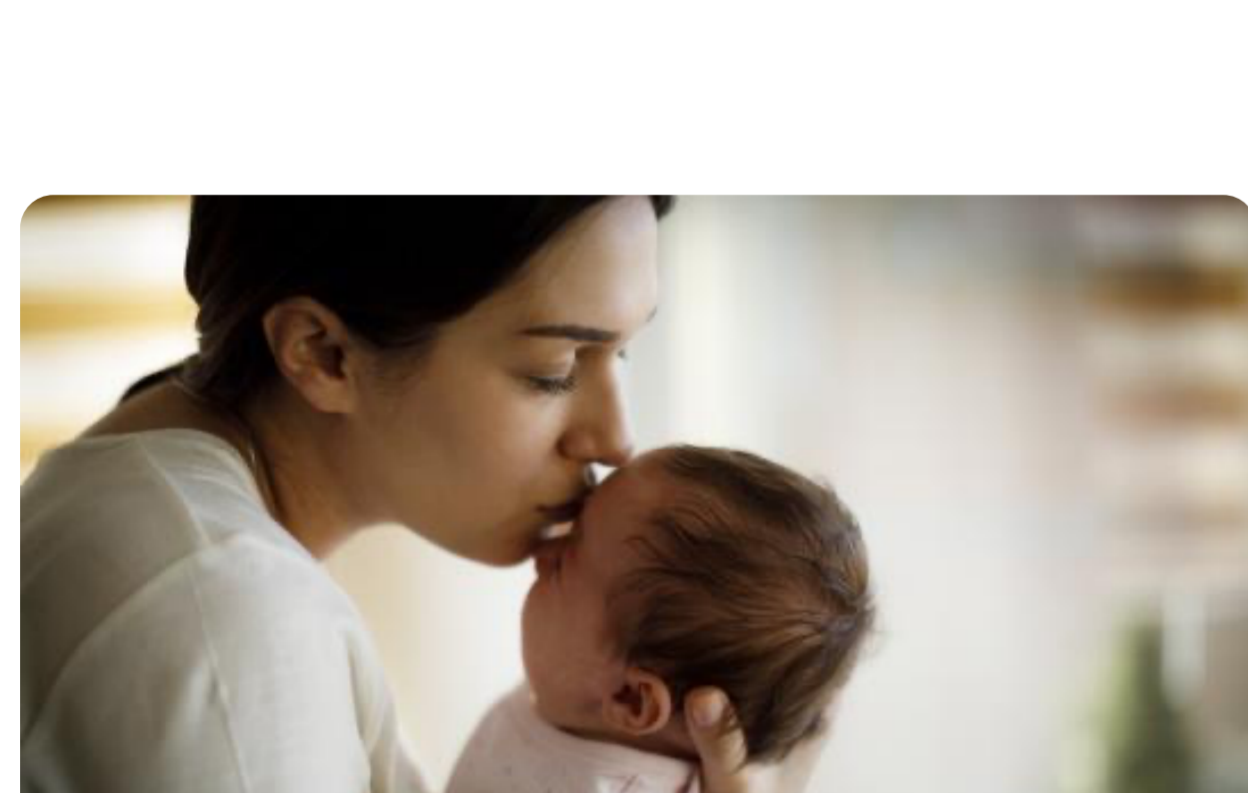
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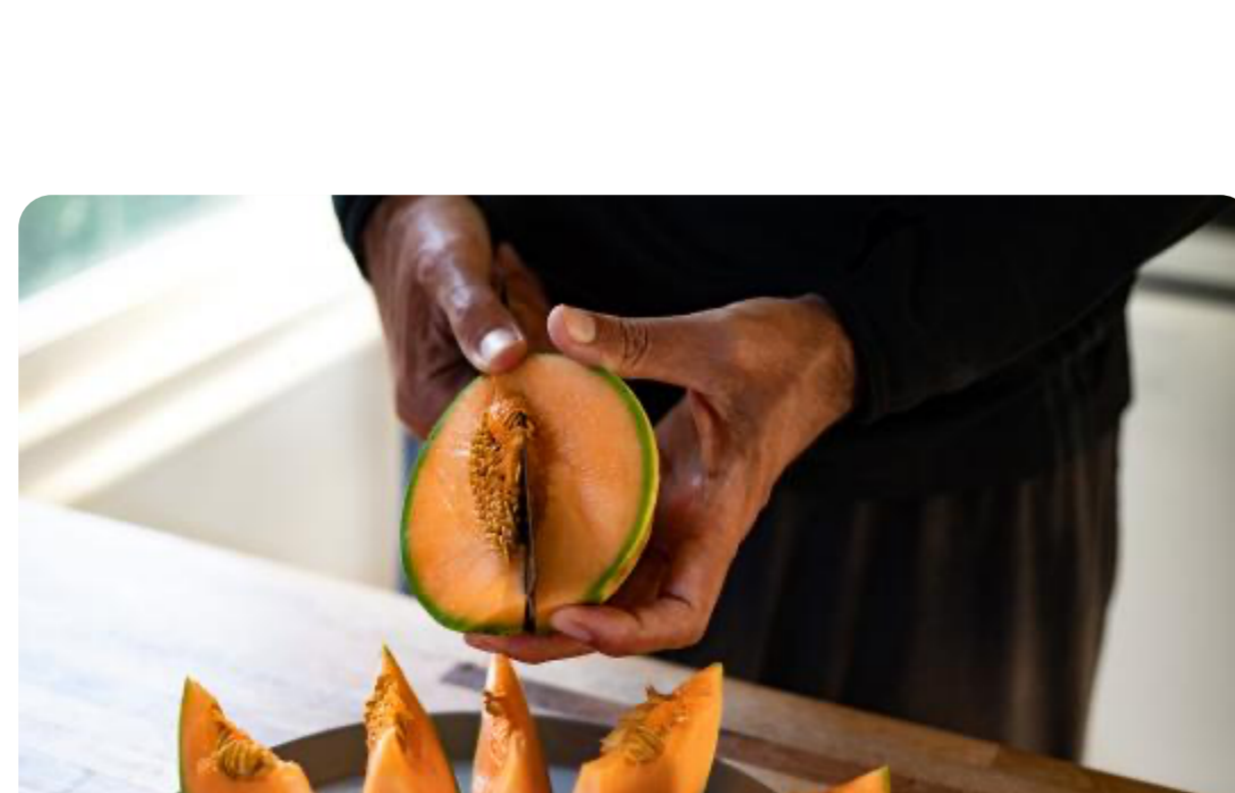
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Published August 3, 2022



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Published July 29, 2022



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By **Rosemary Black**  
Published July 5, 2022

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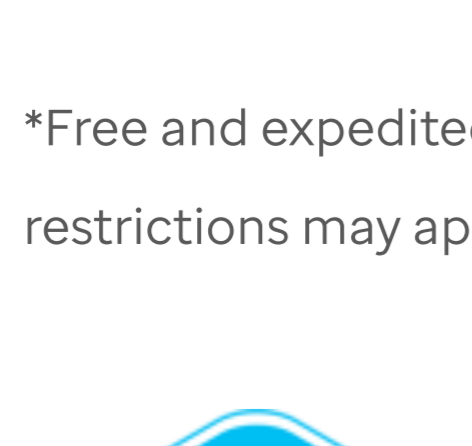
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