

Covid infections are causing a 'tsunami' of hidden health risks

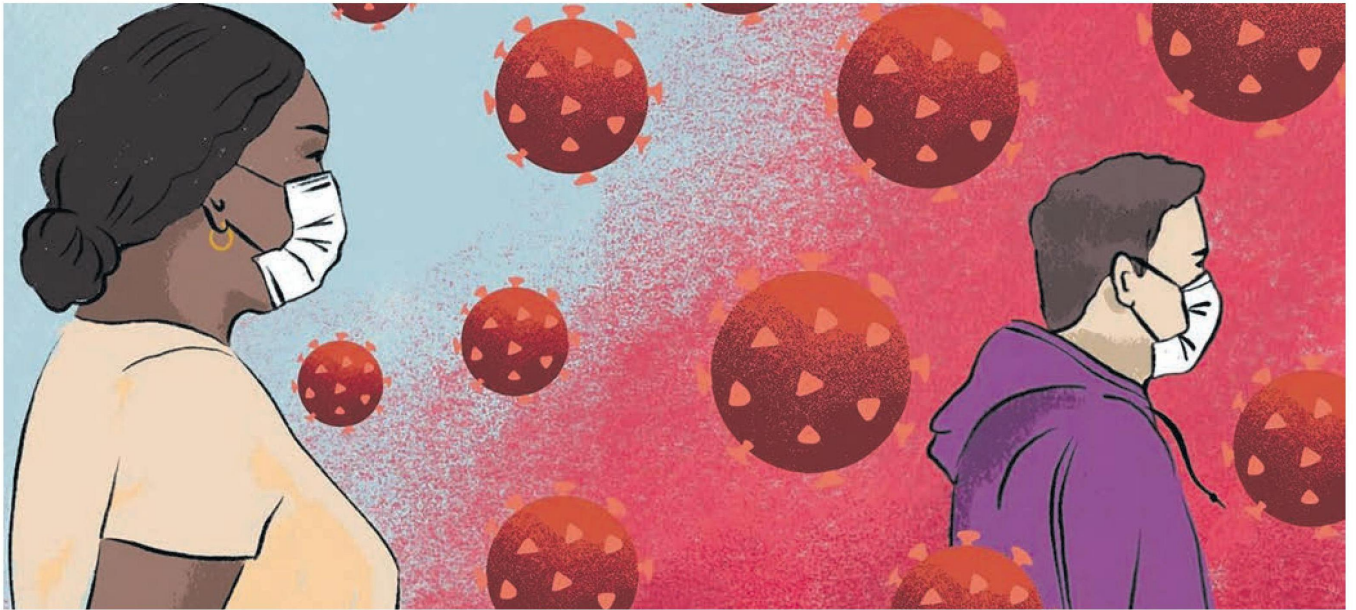


Illustration: Lisa Nelson/GroundUp

Increased knowledge of the coronavirus shows that Covid is not 'just a respiratory disease'. By **Estelle Ellis**

New data from patients who contracted Covid showed that an infection, even if mild or asymptomatic, increases the risk of heart disease (with a Washington University study, *Long-term cardiovascular outcomes of Covid-19*, indicating a 50% increase) within a year.

A study by researchers at the VA Saint Louis Health Care System involving more than 181,000 participants, *Risks and burdens of incident diabetes in long Covid: a cohort study*, also showed a heightened risk for diabetes. People who recovered from Covid were 40% more likely to develop a new case of diabetes compared with a control group, the study found.

"We must think long term and prevent every single infection," said Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the former co-chairperson of the ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19. "We cannot go into the future of this pandemic and just say, 'Let the virus spread'. We need public health awareness. Vaccines must become an essential requirement."

Based on seroprevalence surveys, which measure the level of a pathogen in a population, it is estimated that about 80% to 85% of South Africans have been infected since the start of the pandemic. But Abdool Karim said the new data on the aftereffects of Covid made it essential that those who had not been infected were protected.

Reinfections were possibly mostly caused by the "wily" BA.5 subvariant, which studies showed increased health risks dramatically.

Abdool Karim said the risks of other diseases – such as diabetes and heart disease – rose with each reinfection. The risks for fatigue, gastrointestinal disease, kidney and mental health problems, muscle and skeletal diseases, and pulmonary disease also rose.

"This increased risk of heart disease occurs regardless of the severity of Covid

symptoms," Abdool Karim said. "This is going to change the practice of medicine.

"Before, we had not thought of Covid as a chronic illness... Initially we thought of it as an acute infection. That is how we understood it in 2021 and 2022. That is no more."

New data about infections caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus showed that it was not a respiratory disease.

"It causes disease from head to toe. It primarily enters through the respiratory tract, but Covid-19 is more than just the acute symptoms," he said.

Abdool Karim said his colleagues were now referring to the "tsunami of long Covid" that would hit the health system.

Other long-term effects of Covid infections include a significant effect on the brain. The results of a large study in the UK, in which patients were having follow-up brain scans to measure the effect of ageing on the brain, showed changes in the brains of people who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2.

"Infected people's brains are smaller. They lose 1% to 2% of their grey matter," Abdool Karim said. "This makes them less able to do complex tasks."

He said a study by American scientists studying the brains of elite football players had produced similar findings. It showed that the athletes' performance was significantly affected by Covid infections compared with those who were not infected.

Abdool Karim said South Africa should

have introduced a vaccine mandate a long time ago. Apart from offering personal protection, research showed that vaccinated people were less likely to transmit the virus to others if they were infected, he said.

It also appeared that getting vaccinated can lessen the symptoms of long Covid. "But it is still early days. We need more evidence."

Abdool Karim has filed an affidavit in the upcoming court case between several civil rights organisations and the Health Minister Joe Phaahla on the legality of the public health restrictions, including mask mandates, that were promulgated in May but then withdrawn in June.

In the affidavit, he says: "The risk of acute illness combined with the long-term risks of long Covid – and the increased risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and neurological illness – provides a compelling reason why preventing infection is essential. Even if only a fraction of infections is prevented, this could prevent debilitating long-term illnesses and premature death."

"The pandemic is not over. It is important to note that, globally, there has been an average of over 274,000 SARS-CoV-2 cases and about 1,000 Covid deaths each day in June 2022.

"The world is still in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the virus continuing to mutate, creating new variants as it spreads across the world," Karim said.

He outlined five reasons why the virus

should not be allowed to spread unimpeded:

- It could cause more new infections and reinfections.
 - It will see an increased risk of acute illness and death, especially when the virus spreads to a person at risk, such as someone above 60 years of age.
 - More people will develop long Covid.
 - More people will be at risk of developing cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes and neurological conditions in the long term.
 - It will provide increased chances of new variants emerging, as the virus can only mutate when replicating.
- "Early in 2020, before vaccines became available, a group of scientists proposed the Great Barrington Declaration, which recommended that the virus simply be allowed to spread within the community, with steps to protect the elderly.

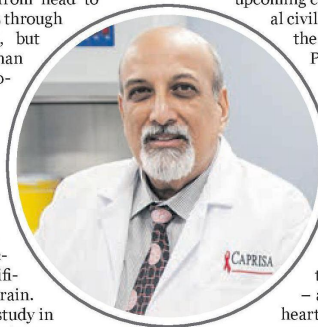
"This approach has been completely discredited and countries that tried versions of it, like Sweden, suffered substantial numbers of deaths."

Although vaccination remained the most effective way to prevent Covid, Abdool Karim said the wearing of masks, avoiding large gatherings and poorly ventilated indoor environments were also ways to avoid getting infected or reinfected.

A study published by *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* in June provided what Abdool Karim called compelling evidence that masks worked – and worked in many different settings across regions in all six continents.

"While not as good as vaccines in preventing the spread of SARS-CoV-2, masks have the protective benefits of slowing viral transmission and reducing the number of people getting infected," Abdool Karim added.

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Prof. Salim Abdool Karim