

NEWS 

We can't just let Covid spread — it raises risk of diabetes, heart disease: studies

Even for those who are not in danger of developing these chronic illnesses, the virus has become a potential trigger

24 July 2022 - 22:08



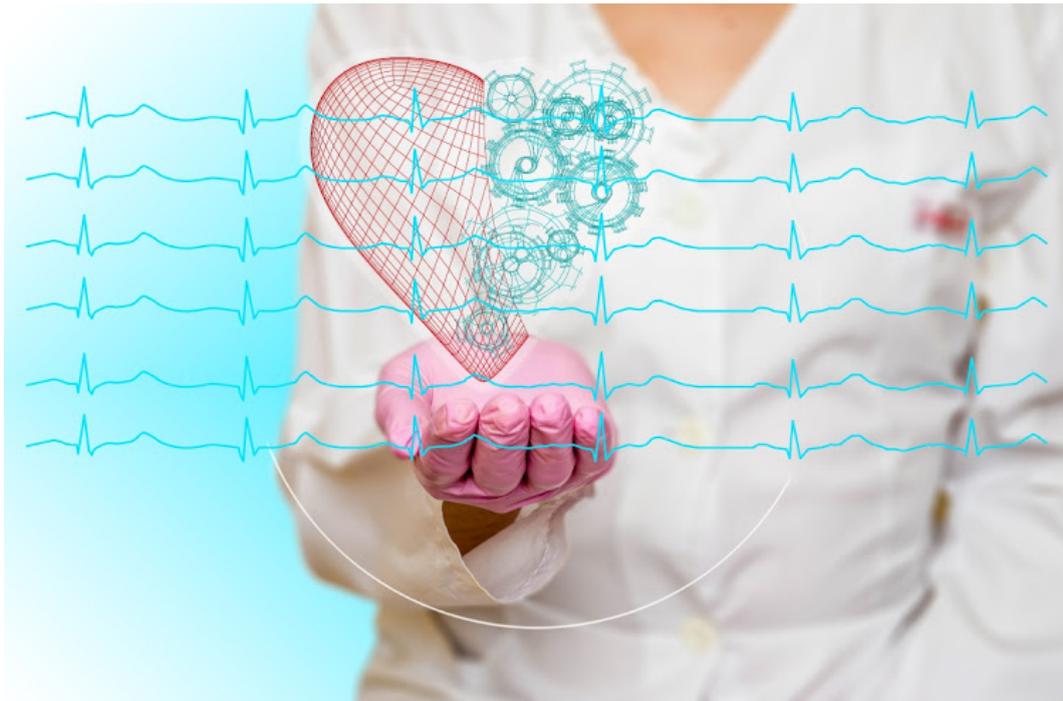
Suthentira Govender

Senior reporter



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LURKING Covid-19 survivors can develop heart disease a year after being infected.

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Covid-19 survivors are at risk of suffering a heart attack a year after contracting the disease even if they were asymptomatic or mildly ill.

Extensive studies published in leading scientific journals are showing Covid-19 is more than an acute infection and must be regarded as a disease that can cause chronic illness.

One study of 150,000 Covid-19 patients published recently in British scientific journal Nature showed that one year later they have a more than 50% risk of heart disease.

Another study in The Lancet found Covid-19 patients are also at increased risk of developing diabetes, while UK researchers showed the disease can cause the loss of grey matter and brain shrinkage.

The findings have raised alarm bells for former head of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee Prof Salim Abdool Karim.

“In 2020 we didn’t know this was a chronic disease that can increase your risk of heart attacks and diabetes.

“We now have to be thinking of the consequence of these infections in years to come.”

IN NUMBERS:

225 — the number of South Africans who die from heart disease and strokes every day

More than 50% — Covid-19 patients’ risk of heart disease a year after contracting the virus

According to the study on heart disease in Covid-19 patients published in Nature, risk was elevated even for those under 65 and who lacked risk factors such as obesity or diabetes.

The researchers based their research on an extensive health-record database curated by the US department of veterans affairs.

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They compared more than 150,000 veterans who survived for at least 30 days after contracting Covid-19 with two groups of uninfected people.

According to the study, people who had recovered from Covid-19 showed stark increases in 20 cardiovascular problems over the year after infection.

They were 52% more likely to have had a stroke than the contemporary control group, meaning that, out of every 1,000 people studied, there were about four more people in the Covid-19 group than in the control group who experienced stroke.

Abdool Karim said: “This a big problem because even if you don’t have risk factors for cardiac disease, Covid-19 becomes your risk factor.”

According to the Heart Stroke and Foundation SA, cardiovascular disease is responsible for almost one in six deaths, claiming more lives than all cancers combined.

Abdool Karim said Covid-19 can’t be viewed in the same manner as it was when it first emerged.

“ This a big problem because even if you don’t have risk factors for cardiac disease, Covid-19 becomes your risk factor.

- Prof Salim Abdool Karim

“You can’t be thinking about how many people are going to be hospitalised because the newer forms of the virus and the level of vaccination has reduced this.

“When people say to me, now let the virus spread, I say to them, we are not only trying to prevent the acute infection, we have to be thinking of preventing any infection.

“Every infection we prevent, we are protecting that person from a disease they are going to have in years from now.

“We must do what we can to protect the public from diabetes and heart disease.”

Abdool Karim said he was among those who supported the removal of public health measures “because we know we are now in a phase of transmission”.

“If history repeats itself, the sixth wave is coming.”

But he would not be drawn on when it is likely to occur.

“We know that in between we will have few infections. What we must be ready for is the next wave.

“When that happens we need to introduce a whole lot of public health measures to protect our population.

“It depends on what is appropriate at the time, what the variant looks like and what’s our vaccine coverage.

“We will need to do something in preparation for the next wave. We can’t simply go into the next wave, saying we are just going to let the virus spread — that’s not an option for us.”

Health department spokesperson Foster Mohale said they would be guided by the insight and advice of scientists regarding new findings on Covid-19.

“Ultimately our objective is to save lives.

“Depending on the severity of the next wave, we will do everything possible to prevent the transmission of the virus by introducing public health measures.

“That will be informed by the rate and severity of the virus,” said Mohale.

Ukraine war: Kyiv's forces pushing towards Russian-held Kherson

Ukraine's President says his forces are advancing "step by step" into the occupied southern region of Kherson.



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