'Long-haulers' suffer from debilitating COVID-19 symptoms months after infection – and doctors can't figure out why

Doctors "don't understand" why some formerly healthy people can have coronavirus symptoms that linger for many weeks or even months, emergency care physician Dr. Ron Elfenbein tells CBS News. While most people with mild cases of COVID-19 recover in about two weeks, according to the World Health Organization, some who refer to themselves as "long-haulers" suffer debilitating symptoms for much longer.

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A recent Dutch study looked at about 1,600 people who reported coronavirus symptoms, 91% of whom were never hospitalized, and found that a vast majority said they continued to suffer health problems like extreme fatigue or shortness of breath nearly three months later.

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Almost half of the people in the study said they could no longer exercise and about 60% said they had difficulty walking, according to the group that commissioned the research.

"We really don't understand the science behind this and we don't really understand the pathophysiology why this is continuing to go on," Elfenbein said. "Could it be that it's your immune response that's causing that? Or could it be that you have some late reactivation of the virus still inside your body, meaning that it's still in there and reactivating from time to time to cause these symptoms?"

Elfenbein said doctors don't know the answers to those questions yet and "the big problem" is they don't know how to treat the ongoing symptoms.

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