

# Navigating the Healthcare System

Category: 1. Introduction

Partnering with your primary care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner)



A primary care provider is a healthcare professional who can provide ongoing care. This can be a family doctor, a nurse practitioner, or a physician assistant, depending on your province.

Your primary care provider will help determine if you have Long COVID. They order tests and interpret them, and refer you to medical specialists and other healthcare providers as necessary. They are a good point person for helping you to navigate the healthcare system.

You may want to ask about:

- Whether your symptoms are typical and 'normal' for Long COVID
- Whether you should be referred to a Long COVID clinic, if it is available in your area
- Whether you need to have tests to see if there may be other conditions contributing to your symptoms
- How to manage and monitor your symptoms
- When and how you can return to your usual activities

- Whether you should be referred to other specialist doctors (such as a cardiologist or therapist)
- Whether you should be referred to other healthcare providers (such as a physiotherapist, a counsellor, an occupational therapist, a dietitian, etc.)
- Whether you would benefit from the support of other providers (such as a counsellor or physiotherapist)
- Whether you can arrange virtual visits (by phone or video) whenever possible – there is some [evidence](#) showing that the benefits of in-person and virtual appointments may be the same, especially if going in person can be difficult

Consider sharing *MyGuide* with your healthcare providers, including your primary care provider, as a starting point for discussion about identifying and managing your symptoms.

## If you don't have a primary care provider

You can still get help from a primary care provider by visiting a walk-in clinic. You can visit the same walk-in clinic every time you need to see a doctor for some consistency and continuity. They will have your record on file. (You can also ask a friend or family member to help you keep track of appointments and a record of test results.)

You can also call 8-1-1 from anywhere in Canada (except in Manitoba, call 1-888-315-9257) to find a primary care provider near you. Please also check the Resources page for your province or territory.

Since walk-in clinics are often busy and the providers may not know you, it is often helpful to focus on your one or two biggest concerns. You can share relevant information from *MyGuide* as a way to talk about your symptoms.

## If you feel your primary care provider is not listening to your concerns or if you feel they may be providing incorrect recommendations

Long COVID is a relatively new condition and many healthcare providers may not know how to best diagnose and treat it. Unfortunately, some people with Long COVID have felt dismissed or not taken seriously by their primary care providers. Some people have also felt like they were given incorrect recommendations, such as when to return to work.

In these situations, it is often important to practice **self-advocacy**. Below are some suggestions on how to do this:

- Be persistent. Sometimes it takes several appointments for a healthcare provider to appreciate the severity of your condition and its impact on your life.

- Be specific with your needs. If you are interested in a specific test or referral, make this clear upfront and explain why.
- If you disagree with what your provider recommends, ask to be referred to a specialist (such as an internal medicine physician) for a second opinion.
- Bring a friend or family member to your appointments to help explain your symptoms to care providers and to keep track of advice you receive.

## You can find additional support navigating care

It can be challenging to find your way around the healthcare system while managing Long COVID symptoms. Even if you have a primary care provider, it can still be difficult to connect with medical specialists and other care providers (such as counsellors, physiotherapists) for next steps in your care, especially if you are experiencing language barriers, live far from health facilities, etc.

[The Canadian Guidelines for Post COVID-19 Condition \(CAN-PCC\) suggests using a care navigator](#) to help find your way through the health and service system.

## Who are care navigators?

A **care navigator** is someone with experience coordinating contact with care providers. A care navigator's role is to help you navigate the healthcare system (please note that it is not their role to provide care). They help make sure that you can access the tests you need and get to the next step of addressing your specific health concerns.

Care navigators can be:

- Health professionals, such as nurses and social workers
- Someone with experience in healthcare or social system
- Someone with training in the healthcare or social system

## How to access a care navigator?

You can talk to a healthcare professional about care navigators and how you can access one in your area, in person or virtually.

You can also call **8-1-1** from anywhere in Canada (except in Manitoba call 1-888-315-9257). It is a free-of-charge health information and advice phone line across Canada. Depending on where you live, you can also connect with a healthcare provider via online chat or video relay services.

**Please note that the 8-1-1 service does not replace ongoing primary care from a family doctor or a nurse practitioner.** It is mainly a helpline and info-line to receive health information and referral for 'in the moment' concerns.

When you call 8-1-1, you speak directly with a health service navigator who can help you navigate the healthcare system and connect you by phone to other health professionals (such as a nurse, dietician, exercise professional, or pharmacist) who can help you further.

The navigators are available any time of the day or night and every day of the year.

## Other providers who can help with your recovery

There are several healthcare providers (not just doctors or nurse practitioners) who can help you during your COVID-19 recovery. You can talk to your primary care provider and also contact provincial regulated bodies or colleges to find a registered healthcare provider.

Remember, private community-based services may be reimbursed through third party funding/insurance.

Below are examples of some providers and how they can help with Long COVID. Please check your provincial/territorial Resources page for how to find these providers in your area.

### Physiotherapist

- Pacing and energy conservation
- Relief for muscle pains and aches
- Strategies on improving your breathing
- Address fatigue from eye movements
- Relief for dizziness (this is a specialty of vestibular physiotherapists)
- Exercises to help build back your strength

### Occupational therapist

- Pacing and energy conservation
- Finding tools, technology, and strategies to cope with fatigue and brain fog
- Coping skills, stress management, improving quality of life
- Returning to work and returning to school planning

## Psychologist or mental health counsellor

- Symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, poor sleep
- Dealing with grief or loss

## Social worker

- Coping skills, stress management, improving quality of life (many social workers also offer counselling for anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Finding financial supports, including disability and employment insurance

## Pharmacist

- Understanding your medications better (what they are for, when to take them, and the side-effects)
- Choosing over-the-counter medications and supplements at the pharmacy

## Dietitians

- Supporting healthy eating to strengthen the immune system and overall well being
- Dietary solutions to help manage fatigue, gut health, and food sensitivities
- Assistance with weight management (unintentional weight loss or weight gain)
- Identifying and addressing nutrient deficiencies to support recovery and long-term health
- Personalized nutrition plans tailored to individual needs and symptoms

## Speech language pathologist

- Support cognition and functional impacts of brain fog/energy management
- Relief for cough and some breathing difficulties

## Naturopathic doctors

- Starting alternative or complementary treatment(s)
- Visit [this module](#) to learn more about how to decide on alternative and complementary treatments

## Registered massage therapists

- Massage therapy to relieve muscle aches and pains

## If your recovery feels long

Studies have shown that many people recover from Long COVID by one year following the initial COVID-19 illness. However, some people have symptoms that last longer than this, with symptoms still present after 2 years.

If you have prolonged symptoms due to Long COVID, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner about doing the following:

- Refer you to a Long COVID clinic if it is available in your province
- Refer you to a medical specialist or other healthcare providers
- Re-assess your symptoms
- Review your prescribed and over-the-counter medications/supplements, as well as the use of alcohol, marijuana, or other substances
- Check for other health conditions that might be contributing to your prolonged symptoms
- Ask about emotional or social factors that might be affecting your recover

## Where to next?

- Read the CAN-PCC recommendations on
  - [the use of in-person and virtual clinical appointments](#)
  - [the use of care navigator](#) (someone with experience coordinating contact with care providers)
- Review [this module](#) to learn more about how to decide on alternative and complementary treatments
- Visit [healthexperiences.ca](http://healthexperiences.ca) and learn about the experiences of people with Long COVID while [accessing care for their condition](#) and how they are [advocating for themselves and others with Long COVID](#).
- Visit [livingwithlongcovid.ca](http://livingwithlongcovid.ca), a site dedicated to studying the psychosocial impact that long-lasting COVID symptoms have on individuals and their families. You can access various educational and advocacy resources on this site.