

OSF Saint Francis Medical Center offering long COVID study

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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PRINT SCRIPT

There have been more than 103 million COVID-19 cases in the United States since January of 2020. While estimates vary, approximately 10 percent of people who get sick with COVID-19 will end up experiencing long COVID symptoms such as chronic pain, brain fog, shortness of breath and chest pain to name a few.

That's why the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is leading a nationwide initiative called Researching COVID to Enhance Recovery, or RECOVER, to understand long COVID better. In Illinois, the program is called the ILLnet RECOVER study and is led by the University of Illinois Chicago. OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria was chosen as one of the ILLnet RECOVER clinical trial hosts.

John Hafner, MD, is one of the principal investigators for the study at OSF HealthCare. He's also a clinical professor of emergency medicine with the University of Illinois College of Medicine and an Emergency Medicine doctor for OSF HealthCare in Peoria.

"Long COVID is a series of very diverse symptoms that people develop after they've been sick with COVID," Dr. Hafner explains. "It's different for everyone. We think somewhere between 10%-20% of people that develop COVID will end up with long COVID symptoms."

Dr. Hafner says to be able to treat long COVID, you first need to be able to understand it. He hopes this study does just that.

"We're able to characterize exactly what the symptoms are of long COVID, be able to discuss how we would diagnose that, as well as enroll patients in future trials to try and improve long COVID symptoms," Dr. Hafner says.

This is the hope for Keith Hanson, MD, another investigator on the ILLnet RECOVER study. Dr. Hanson has kept in touch with many of the patients treated for long COVID and says the responses have been very positive.

"A year from now we'd like to see clinical trials with treatments in this population. Because right now we see the symptoms and try to define it. The next stage is seeing if there are treatments that can be effective," Dr. Hanson says. "Maybe the patients we've enrolled will be interested in the treatment to see if it will alleviate their symptoms."

The program began in August of 2022, and since then 166 patients have been enrolled in the Peoria area, and 717 people in the Chicago area. Dr. Hafner says OSF HealthCare, the Peoria City/County Health Department, Carle Health and the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria are working together to make the program a success.

“OSF Saint Francis has a wonderful population here for the trials,” Dr. Hafner says. “We have rural and urban, and we span a great distance throughout Central Illinois.”

Thanks to a \$22 million investment from the NIH in ILLnet RECOVER, study participants can be compensated for their time. The goal of the nationwide effort is to gain as much information from different people in different locations to understand the lingering symptoms of long COVID, Dr. Hafner adds.

Not everyone enrolled in the program is a current COVID-19 patient. Rather, Dr. Hanson says it has been a way for people to learn more about their overall health.

“Patients that have had chronic fatigue or headaches from COVID and they want to know if this is related to COVID. They might wonder if it’s just related to them getting older or if something else is going on,” Dr. Hanson says. “A lot of people are figuring out they have high cholesterol or low vitamin D and they didn’t know about it.”

Nearly 14,000 adults and more than 9,500 kids have been enrolled in the NIH RECOVER study across the United States.