

Since her first bout of Long COVID, Lee's been determined to turn her negative experience into a positive one by helping other sufferers.



LONG *and* WINDING ROAD

Renowned nutritionist and gut health expert Lee Holmes's life took a sharp detour when she contracted Long COVID in 2022. She shares the lessons she's learnt and the discoveries she's made on her lengthy road to recovery.



My journey with Long COVID began in April 2022. I contracted COVID while travelling in England and figured that, after a week or two, I'd be fine and able to fly home. Three months later, I was still in the UK. My COVID symptoms lasted for weeks and weeks. The fevers, chills and body aches slowly morphed into brain fog and absolutely debilitating fatigue, chronic fatigue, where I'd try to go for a walk, even for five minutes, and then have to spend the next whole day in bed.

I also had terrible chest pain, which was scary. You just don't know what's happening. It turned out to be pericarditis (inflammation of the pericardium around the heart). I had to lie in bed on my front for a couple of months because my chest was so painful. When visiting a cardiologist about my pericarditis, he confirmed what I had already suspected: that I had joined the steadily growing Long COVID brigade.

When I finally returned home to Australia three months later, I was literally crawling up the

46 stairs to my home, my suitcase behind me, just thinking, 'I need to go to bed.' I then spent the next four or five months trying to recover.

Along with the overwhelming physical symptoms I was experiencing, a big component for me and many, many people is the mental health side. After being so debilitated and chronically fatigued, you do get into a state where you start to get depressed and really anxious.

Personally, I felt so much shame around it as well, because here I was, a health expert who has written 11 books and was giving people advice, and I couldn't get out of bed. I felt like such a fraud, like I wasn't being honest with people.

The depression and anxiety were so overwhelming that one day I called Lifeline and said, 'I just don't know if I can do this anymore.' And the woman I spoke to said, 'Go outside. Be in the moment. Look at the clouds. Just bring yourself back to reality.'

After that, it was kind of like a jolt. I thought to myself, 'I really need to do something here. ►



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How can I spin this into more of a positive? If this is my personal experience and I've really struggled with this, I'm sure other people have. How can I turn this around to helping them?"

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

That's when I started to research it. At the time I wasn't getting many answers from the doctors, because they didn't know much about it. But how could they? It was such a new thing. As a clinical nutritionist, I was delving into more natural approaches as well. I started documenting everything and interviewing lots of experts from around the world, and it gave me a lot of clarity and so many revelations.

One of the biggest revelations is the amount of people who have Long COVID. The most recent figures show that it's now at 400 million. That's a *lot* of people. From a research perspective, there were two major revelations for me. One is that Long COVID is a multi-system issue. I always thought it was a respiratory problem, but then I started getting all these different symptoms and came to understand that it goes across so many different organs and systems in the body. I started to realise it was so much bigger than I thought it was.

The second revelation was that it can stay in the body for up to and longer than two years. There's something called viral persistence, where the virus stays in your body within viral reservoirs throughout the body, so it can wax and wane. If you go out one day and do a little too much, for example, you can spend the

following week with symptoms again. They've done tests on the tissues of people who have experienced this and they still have the virus in their system two years later.

BECOMING IMMUNE

Long COVID is very confusing for a lot of medical experts, because we still don't know exactly why people get it, but there are a number of different theories. Two that really resonated with me were that when the virus gets into the body through the angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptor, your immune system and immune cells kind of counteract each other. So, at the heart of it, Long COVID is an immune dysregulation where your body goes haywire, and all the messages and immune reactions are topsy turvy and out of control.

The second part I learnt was that Long COVID is also an inflammatory condition. When the virus gets into the body, it sparks



Following a low-histamine, low-inflammation diet, which is focused on whole foods, has helped Lee manage her symptoms.

inflammation. Some people have something called a cytokine storm, where the body releases histamines and your T cells, your immune cells, go haywire as well.

With this new understanding, implementing a protocol that would get my immune dysregulation and inflammation down became my main focus. At first, I wanted to get straight onto it, so I took anti-histamines, and they made me feel so much better. Then I started changing my diet to a low-histamine, low-inflammation one. So, while that's focused on a lot of healthy whole foods and things like that, it's interesting that many histamine foods are ones that are usually considered good for you.

If you look at gut health, which is my specialty, a lot of fermented foods are very high in histamine, so this has meant switching over from a gut-friendly diet to more of a low-histamine diet. There is also some research out there that autophagy, which is brought about by

intermittent fasting, helps to clear the damaged cells and viral particles that stay in the body, and also helps to lower inflammation. So, I've been doing that sometimes as well – having dinner at six and then having breakfast a bit later the following day. I've noticed that when I do that, I do feel better the next day.

Along with following a low-histamine, low-inflammation diet, I also started taking a mast cell stabiliser, as Long COVID had reignited my mast cell activation syndrome (MCAS). After maintaining my protocol, it probably took me about eight months to feel better that first time.

REPEAT CUSTOMER

Yes, that's right, I've now had COVID three times, and I've had Long COVID each of those three times. But now, each time I get Long COVID, because I'm doing my protocol immediately and getting straight on to anything antihistamine and anti-inflammatory, I get better a lot quicker. So, the last time, I only had Long COVID afterwards for about a month, because I knew how to regulate it and what was happening to the processes in the body.

I would say I'm 90 per cent better now. If I do a lot of exercise, I sometimes still feel the fatigue and the post-exertional malaise, so I just do more gentle workouts now – walking and a little bit of gym, but I don't do running or anything too strenuous. Brain fog is still an issue for me now as well; things like trying to remember words. A lot of people with Long COVID status can't get that mental acumen back again completely. So, I've been doing things like Scrabble online, and mental exercises. It sounds simple, but they really help and have been kind of fun.

A STORY TO TELL

I'm so excited to be able to share my Long COVID experience and all the things I've learnt in my book *Nature's Way to Healing: A Long Covid Guide*. I really hope I'm able to help others get through this experience – especially women.

Many, many more women than men suffer from Long COVID. Women are becoming the canaries in the coal mine, so to speak, and their experiences are providing doctors with important information about Long COVID and why so many women are susceptible to it. ►

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Lee has written a book about her experience with Long COVID in the hope it'll help fellow sufferers deal with the daily challenges. **Opposite** Getting medical attention during her illness.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB PALMER AND LUISA BRIMBLE (MAIN IMAGES)

The research isn't definitive at this point, but sometimes it can be a genetic predisposition to immune dysregulation. For example, a lot of women have autoimmune disease, and they're the ones getting Long COVID. Many women, like myself, have MCAS. They're getting it as well.

And, of course, being a woman, you've got a lot on your plate: you might be a wife, a mother, a girlfriend, maybe you're trying to work as well while struggling through this experience. Not only is it physically debilitating, but it takes you out of being social, and that's really difficult, too.

On top of that you've got the perceptions other people have of Long COVID to deal with as well. There are many different camps and there's a lot of stigma. You've got the anti-vaccination camp, who say Long COVID is not a real thing. I'm personally not vaccinated because of my MCAS - when I went to get vaccinated, they told me it was too risky. So then you've got vaccinated people saying, 'You should've been vaccinated, that's why you've got Long COVID.' And then there are the people who've had chronic fatigue syndrome, who say, 'Well, Long COVID is just chronic fatigue, and we've been suffering this for 20 years. They don't call it Long Chronic Fatigue.' There are so many camps out there, especially online, and people who are already battling Long COVID can face a lot of discrimination. It's no wonder people are depressed!

I hope my book gives people with Long COVID a voice to say, 'yes, it's real' and provide them with hope and resilience in the face of the challenges they face. One of my biggest personal difficulties has been to stop and pace myself. Because I run a business and I'm naturally a real go-getter, the challenge has been having to listen to those body cues. If I don't, I'm going to end up in bed for, say, a week if I've done too much.

My book offers heaps of advice on how to work through your symptoms, a meal planner, 30 low-histamine recipes and so much more. I've had women reach out to me since reading it and one lady said she started crying by page 20 because she felt like she'd finally been heard. I really hope I can help more people on this journey. **P**

Nature's Way to Healing: A Long Covid Guide by Lee Holmes (Rockpool, \$32.99) is out now.



How Long COVID affects your body

BODY SYSTEMS TARGETED

- Respiratory system
- Cardiovascular system
- Nervous system
- Immune system
- Musculoskeletal system
- Gastrointestinal system
- Chemosensory systems
- Other systems

THE SYMPTOMS

- Shortness of breath, coughing and chest pain
- Heart palpitations
- Brain fog, difficulty concentrating, memory problems and headaches

ONGOING INFLAMMATION AND AUTOIMMUNE ISSUES

- Muscle and joint pain
- Diarrhoea and nausea
- Loss of taste and smell
- Long COVID can also affect the endocrine, renal, dermatological, ocular and auditory systems

Lifeline offers free, confidential one-on-one support for people who are in crisis or feeling overwhelmed. Call 13 11 14 or chat online at lifeline.org.au