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One in two Europeans has a at least one neurological condition Neurology congress to also focus on long Covid

Neurological conditions are already the third-most common type of complaint in the world, with numbers now steadily increasing in the wake of the pandemic. People with Covid-19 can develop a range of complications from loss of sense of smell to strokes. Now, a new illness known as long Covid is emerging in those who have recovered from the disease. A general increase in headaches and sleep disorders has been recorded even among people who have not been infected with Covid-19 due to greater health burdens. Modern treatment approaches and prevention measures for neurological complaints will be at the heart of discussions at the Neurology Congress of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN) from 19-22 June at the Austria Center Vienna.

“One in two Europeans suffers from at least one neurological condition. As a result, neurological diseases are the third-most common health condition after cardiological and oncological issues. The spectrum spans everything from headaches and sleeping disorders to neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer’s, as well as strokes. And we can see that neurological problems have been on the rise during the pandemic, both among Covid-19 patients and those who have recovered from the disease, as well as people who are struggling with an increased overall psychological burden,” explained Prof. Thomas Berger, President of the local organisational committee of the European Neurology Congress, member of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN) board, President of the Austrian Society of Neurology (ÖGN) and Head of the Department of Neurology at the Medical University of Vienna.

Neurological complaints in Covid-19 patients

60-80% of people infected with Covid-19 report a loss of taste or smell. “For the majority of Covid-19 patients this loss of function is only temporary and goes away after 8-10 days. But in a fifth of cases, the issues can persist longer – sometimes for months,” Berger explains. While highly unpleasant, perception of foul smells such as rotting meat or mould are a sign that the sense of smell is returning. Depending on the severity of the Covid-19 infection, other neurological complications can develop including disorientation, impaired consciousness and even strokes. “Up to 3% of people requiring hospital treatment go on to suffer strokes due to blood clots caused by Covid-19,” the neurologist continued. In extremely rare circumstances, Covid-19 can trigger inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) or an autoimmune disease that effects the brain, spinal marrow or the peripheral nervous system.

Up to 30% of all people who recovered from Covid suffer subsequent neurological complications

After recovering, up to 30% of Covid-19 patients experience neurological complications (stroke, persistent olfactory disorders, etc.) that developed as a consequence of the disease.

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“In addition, a new condition known as post-Covid or long Covid has emerged,” Berger explained.

Long Covid – a complex new condition
“Typical neurological symptoms of long Covid include disordered sleep, subjective cognitive disorders such as impaired memory, systemic exertion intolerance, increased fatigue and disorders of the autonomic nervous system, which can manifest in various ways, including dizziness and vertigo,” Berger noted. These can emerge up to 12 weeks after contracting Covid-19 or present themselves immediately after infection. According to the latest studies, around 10% of people undergoing outpatient treatment continue to experience these long-term symptoms for as long as six months after catching the disease. Long Covid can also affect people who had relatively mild Covid-19 symptoms.

Coronavirus pandemic behind a rise in neurological conditions
“We are seeing that it is not just people who contracted Covid-19 that are struggling with neurological complaints and complications. There has been a general increase in neurological issues in society during the pandemic,” Berger said. Whether it is people working on intensive care units or exhausted parents who are trying to balance home schooling and working from home: restrictions, general anxiety, and new and greater demands placed on the individual are increasingly bubbling up to the surface in the form of physical complaints. Sleeping disorders and headaches are a typical response to the pressures people find themselves under, and are becoming increasingly prevalent.

Modern treatment approaches for headaches and sleeping disorders
“As we are still in the early stage of getting to grips with long Covid, it is only possible to treat the various neurological conditions symptomatically at the moment. But with other indications such as headaches and sleeping disorders we have a wealth of experience to draw on, meaning that we can offer causal therapy in addition to simply treating symptoms,” Berger said. 10% of Austrians suffer from migraines and 15% from tension headaches. There can – but does not necessarily have to – be a causal relationship between headaches and sleeping disorders. Diaries and a new generation of medical apps offer a simple and effective source of support by delivering an insight into the frequency of and links between headaches and sleeplessness. Sleep specialists and headache clinics help to refine the diagnosis. “The aim is to define clear causal relationships and take preventive action so that migraines and tension headaches do not arise in the first place,” he explained.

Prevention makes sense
Lots of neurological complaints can be prevented. Similarly to the way that testing and vaccinations are key measures in the prevention of Covid-19, the neurologist pointed out just how effective behavioural changes can be in averting other neurological conditions. “We know that timely risk avoidance and changing behaviours can help to prevent 30-50% of strokes and 20-30% of dementia cases,” he concluded.

About the EAN
The European Academy of Neurology (EAN) is an umbrella organisation with more than 40,000 individual members. Headquartered in Vienna, it brings together all of the neurological

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societies throughout Europe. Each year its annual congress attracts around 7,000 participants. In 2020 it held its first-ever online congress, which was attended by 45,000 people. This year's EAN Congress will be held online at the Austria Center Vienna, before playing out at the venue as a hybrid event in 2022.

About IAKW-AG
Internationales Amtssitz- und Konferenzzentrum Wien, Aktiengesellschaft (IAKW-AG) is responsible for maintaining the Vienna International Centre (VIC) and operating the Austria Center Vienna. The Austria Center Vienna is Austria's largest conference centre, with 24 halls, 180 meeting rooms, and some 26,000 m² of exhibition space, and is one of the top players on the international conference circuit.

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