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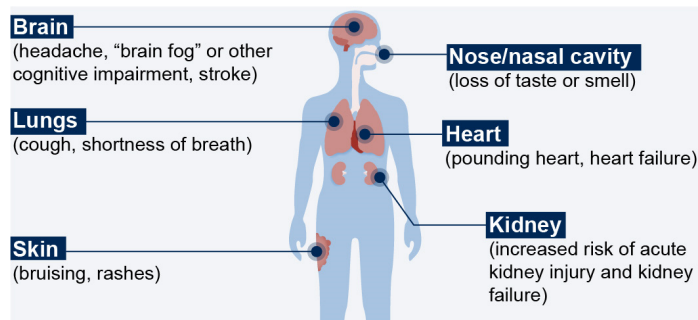
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FEATURED Q&A

Will Long Covid Be a Major Problem for Latin America?



Millions of people in Latin America and the Caribbean could be susceptible to long Covid, the continuation of symptoms far after the initial infection. Some symptoms of long Covid are illustrated. // Image: U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Q While the urgency of the Covid-19 pandemic has passed, some 10 percent of people who have been infected with the novel coronavirus may develop a condition known as long Covid, the continuation of symptoms three months after the initial infection, *The Guardian* reported July 13. Experts have recognized cases of the condition in Latin American countries including Colombia and Bolivia, where getting treatment has been difficult, the newspaper reported. How big of a problem is long Covid in Latin America? How prepared are the region's health systems to treat people with the condition? What more must the region's health systems and the private sector do in order to treat long Covid?

A Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine: "In some of the worst affected Covid nations in Latin America, including Brazil, Mexico, Peru and Colombia, where Covid deaths were the highest, we should also expect significant numbers of long Covid cases. While long Covid can occur even after mild or asymptomatic infection, we have seen that the risk increases with severe Covid. Among unvaccinated or under vaccinated populations in Brazil, Mexico, Peru and Colombia, we should therefore anticipate heavy burdens of long Covid among both adult and pediatric populations. Therefore, just as HIV/AIDS began to dominate both adult and pediatric medical training and practice during the 1990s, we should recognize how long Covid will become a new reality for physicians and other health care providers, as well as public health agencies in Latin America's worst affected countries. Practically speaking, this means

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TODAY'S NEWS

BUSINESS

Higher Lending in Mexico Drives Profits at BBVA

Spanish bank BBVA today reported 2.03 billion euros (\$2.23 billion) in profit for the second quarter, saying that higher lending levels at its Mexico helped to drive profits.

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ECONOMIC

Colombian Police Seize Funds Derived From Stolen Oil

Colombian police have seized \$329 million worth of property and bank accounts linked to the sale of stolen oil.

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POLITICAL

Mexican President Defends Armed Forces Against Accusations

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador defended the armed forces against accusations by an international panel that they were complicit in the 2014 disappearance of 43 college students.

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López Obrador // File Photo: Mexican Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Mexican President Defends Military Amid Accusations

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Thursday defended the country's military following accusations by an international panel of experts that the armed forces were complicit in the 2014 disappearance of 43 college students in Guerrero state, Reuters reported. The Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts said earlier this week that the military has withheld information about the case of the student teachers who went missing



If progress has been made, it's precisely because of the cooperation of the navy and the army."

— Andrés Manuel López Obrador

in the city of Iguala. López Obrador rejected the accusation. "It's not true the navy and the army aren't helping," the president said at a press conference, the wire service reported. "If progress has been made, it's precisely because of the cooperation of the navy and the army," he added. López Obrador said that 115 people have been detained in connection with the case, including a former top prosecutor and two generals, and that a "pact of silence" surrounding the students' disappearance has been broken. "What's most important now is the search [for the missing youths]," he said. The remains of only three of the students have been formally identified. Parents of the missing students have urged López Obrador to order the military to cooperate in the investigation. "The president has to order them to hand over the information," said Mario González, the father of one of the missing youths, Reuters reported. The international panel also said this week that it was ending its investigation

because the armed forces have repeatedly lied to it and misled it about the case, The New York Times reported. The Mexico office of the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed support for the panel and said it regretted that the "armed forces have not provided all the information requested" by the panel, Reuters reported.

BUSINESS NEWS

Higher Lending in Mexico Drives Profit of Spain's BBVA

Spanish bank BBVA today reported 2.03 billion euros (\$2.23 billion) in profit for the second quarter of the year, a 30.5 percent increase as compared to the same quarter last year, saying that higher lending levels in its Mexico unit helped to drive earnings. The bank said in a statement that its earnings per share increased 41.1 percent year-on-year in the first six months of 2023, to 62 euro cents per share. "These good results and the execution of our strategy allow us to have a positive impact on all of our stakeholders: customers, shareholders, employees and society as a whole," Chief Executive Officer Onur Genç said in a statement. "Between January and June, BBVA's loan portfolio increased 8.4 percent on an annual basis, driving the growth and development of the countries in which we operate," he added. In Mexico, BBVA said its lending activity increased 11.1 percent year-on-year "with growth in all segments." Net attributable profit at the bank's Mexico unit grew 30.1 percent year-on-year through June, to 2.61 billion euros, mainly as a result of higher net interest income, which grew 26.6 percent. "Growth in net fees and commissions also stood out," the bank said in its statement, with 121 percent year-on-year increase. Risk indicators "remained solid," with nonperforming loan and coverage ratios at 2.5 percent and 129 percent, respectively, the bank said. BBVA added that the accumulated cost of risk in the Mexico unit was stable at 2.86 percent. In its South America units, BBVA said

NEWS BRIEFS

Guatemala's Torres Calls on Opponent to Explain Allegations Against Party

Guatemalan presidential candidate Sandra Torres, said Thursday that her rival, Bernardo Arévalo, should explain the corruption allegations against his party, Movimiento Semilla, EFE reported. "If the other party has a criminal problem, it must be separated from the administrative issue. They will have to clarify their situation," Torres said at an event in Washington, adding that "no one is above the law." [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the July 14 issue of the Advisor.]

State Department Orders Nonemergency Gov't Personnel to Leave Haiti

The U.S. State Department on Thursday ordered nonemergency government personnel and family members to vacate Haiti over kidnapping, crime, civil unrest and poor health care infrastructure, Reuters reported. The State Department added that U.S. citizens not working for the government should also leave the country as soon as possible. "Kidnapping is widespread, and victims regularly include U.S. citizens. Kidnappers may use sophisticated planning or take advantage of unplanned opportunities, and even convoys have been attacked," it said in a travel advisory.

MoneyGram Begins Offering New Deposit Service in Venezuela

MoneyGram International announced Thursday that it has partnered with Venezuelan bank Banesco to offer the bank's customers a new account deposit service. Banesco's customers will be able to receive remittance transfers directly to their accounts in real time, MoneyGram said in a statement. More than seven million Venezuelans have emigrated since 2015, according to the International Monetary Fund.

lending increased 11.2 percent year-on-year. "Growth in retail segments in the main countries of the region was particularly noteworthy, as well as the wholesale portfolio in Argentina and Colombia," the bank said. Net attributable profit in South America rose 22.6 percent year-on-year to 367 million euros, BBVA said. The bank's nonperforming loan ratio in South America was 4.3 percent, while the coverage ratio was 95 percent, it added.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Colombian Police Seize Funds Derived From Stolen Oil

Colombian police have seized property and bank accounts valued at 1.3 trillion pesos (\$329 million) derived from the sale and export of stolen crude oil, officials said on Thursday, Reuters reported. Some 975,000 barrels of crude were illegally exported between 2020 and 2021, a police statement said. The national police and Interpol have carried out seven investigations since 2016 into the smuggling of oil by four criminal organizations. Thousands of barrels of oil are stolen from Colombia's pipelines every day, often by criminal gangs who refine it into a fuel known as *pategrillo*, used to make cocaine, the wire service reported. "Businessmen and technicians are involved and the National Liberation Army (ELN) is clearly linked due to its illegal activities of hydrocarbon theft and attacks against the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline," Katherine Casas, an independent energy analyst told Reuters, referring to a rebel group that regularly perforates pipelines. Earlier this week, authorities confiscated houses, boats, vehicles and four refineries, as well as 17 bank accounts, worth a total of 20.3 billion pesos (\$5.14 million). Colombia's state-owned oil company Ecopetrol has been most affected by the scheme, costing it 60 billion pesos, police said. "From 2013 to 2023, 9,925 illegal valves have been removed from Ecopetrol Group's transportation systems," the company said in a statement.

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recruiting and training a new generation of cardiovascular and pulmonary physicians, as well as neurologists and psychiatrists, to deal with what might become a long Covid tsunami in Latin America. Because the United States is similarly at risk in some of its worst affected states, such as Florida and my state of Texas, we might consider new partnerships between biomedical research and health care institutions in these two states and those in neighboring regions of Latin America. It has now been more than three years since we first saw how Covid caused acute devastation in Ecuador early in the pandemic. Through the specter and lens of long Covid, we must recognize this is just the beginning."

A **Katherine Bliss, senior fellow at the CSIS Global Health Policy Center:** "Considering the magnitude of the outbreak in Latin America and the Caribbean, with at least 85 million cases reported, according to recent Pan American Health Organization data, a high number of people could be considered to be (or have been) at risk for developing long Covid. Preventing new infections among those at greatest risk and providing antiviral treatment to vulnerable people who do become infected can help mitigate the likelihood of developing the post-Covid condition. Ensuring patients recognize the symptoms, including pain, fatigue, respiratory conditions and neurological complications, and seek diagnosis and treatment in a timely manner, is important to offset the potential loss of income and educational opportunities associated with chronic illness. However, securing testing and care for long Covid may be challenging, because of providers' low awareness as well as stigma surrounding treatment for chronic conditions in some places and because many countries' health guidelines and insurance programs do not adequately cover care for noncommunicable diseases, already a leading cause of death and disability in the region.

Rebuilding the health work force, continuing to finance and extend primary health care services at the community level, educating providers and the public about long Covid, and strengthening the provision and management of care for all noncommunicable

“Securing testing and care for long Covid may be challenging...”

— Katherine Bliss

conditions, including those associated with long Covid, are important steps. Sustaining the provision of Covid-19 vaccines to groups at greatest risk of developing long Covid and intensifying research into the most promising treatment options are also critical."

A **Ricardo Izurieta, professor and director for global communicable diseases at the University of South Florida:** "The world continues to grapple with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, and one significant consequence is the prevalence of long Covid. This syndrome manifests in patients who have recovered from Covid-19 but persistently experience symptoms for months after their initial infection. Regrettably, health care systems in Latin America are predominantly designed to handle acute events like pandemics, resulting in an absence of adequate assessment and systematic interventions for this chronic condition. Currently, financial constraints burden regional governments, compelling them to prioritize other neglected public health programs over long Covid. Nonetheless, some exceptional countries have taken proactive steps and established specialized clinics and centers to address long Covid. Similarly to the thoroughness of a physician with a patient, Latin American governments should undertake the following actions to address long-Covid comprehen-

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sively: 1.) Conduct research and surveillance to diagnose the long Covid situation in the country; 2.) Establish strategically distributed specialized clinics and centers across the territory; 3.) Provide comprehensive training for health care professionals in the recognition and management of long Covid; 4.) Strengthen the telemedicine system to reach remote areas effectively; 5.) Facilitate the creation of support groups to offer solidarity and understanding to affected individuals; 6.) Prioritize mental health support to aid those affected by long Covid; 7.) Foster collaboration with universities and research institutes to enhance understanding and treatment options for this condition; 8.) Ensure economic accessibility to these critical services; 9.) Allocate government and private resources to ensure the sustainable management of long Covid. By implementing these measures, Latin America can offer better care and support to individuals grappling with long Covid, thus mitigating the ongoing impact of the pandemic sequelae on public health and society.”

A **María del Rocío Sáenz Madrigal, former health minister of Costa Rica:** “The late symptoms of Covid-19 have not yet reached a consensus on their final name. This shows fragmentation and disarticulation among the findings, the evidence and the multiplicity of interests at stake. Hence, the delay in

the recognition of the condition’s presence and magnitude, the persistence of rumors without evidence and few sites for the public to locate evidence-based information. Based on my experience, I visualize a triad of risk made up of the following dimensions: 1.) clinical phenotypic expression patterns of Covid-19 described by Ernesto Cairoli (respiratory, cardiovascular, psychoneurocognitive and persistent inflammatory activity); 2.) unequal living conditions of individuals, families or communities and, 3.) fragmented, segmented and underfunded health systems. These factors under each social, economic and environmental context, are starting to compete with the scarce resources available to the region’s health systems. The formation of local multidisciplinary teams leading quantitative and qualitative research, which links the clinical and epidemiological, determinants of health, patient experience and clinical teams, could contribute to establishing guidelines according to greater clinical and social risk. It is necessary to strengthen health preparedness, as well as epidemiological and genomic surveillance; adjust first-response services and establish a clear and simple route to be followed by patients presenting such symptoms.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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