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The Multisystem Pathophysiology of Post-COVID-19 Syndrome: A Contemporary Summary of Clinical Knowledge

Soheir M. Daboup
Alqadisya Clinic, Tripoli, Libya
*(*Corresponding Author: Soheir M. Daboup, daboupsoheir@gmail.com)*

Abstract

Now viewed as a public health and economic challenge rather than a peculiar post-viral issue, post-COVID-19 syndrome (PCS) — colloquially referred to as "Long COVID" — is estimated to impact 10-15% of people following initial infection . PCS is a heterogeneous, multi-organ illness characterized by persistent, relapsing, or newly occurring symptoms at or beyond two months after infection, in the absence of an alternative diagnosis [1]. This is a narrative review which synthesizes emerging clinical evidence for the integrated pathophysiological mechanisms of PCS, namely: incomplete viral clearance, persisting immune dysregulation, microvascular injury to the endothelium, hypercoagulability, and autonomic dysregulation. We then present these underlying drivers and correlate them with systemic, neurological, cardiovascular, and pulmonary findings, and finish with a consideration of progressive, personalized treatment regimens.

Keywords: *Post-COVID-19 Syndrome; Long COVID; Pathophysiology; Viral Persistence; Neuroinflammation; Microclots; Dysautonomia; Endothelial Dysfunction.*

1. Introduction

The emergence of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) brought about an acute public health crisis and an immediate medical response unlike any other previously experienced globally. However, recovery from the initial phase of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is often incomplete and protracted. Post-COVID-19 Syndrome (PCS), an official diagnosis by the WHO defined as the continuation or new development of symptoms lasting beyond three months after infection and at least two months from the start of symptom onset , and colloquially referred to as "Long COVID," represents a post-viral crisis that may be affecting over 400 million people globally and poses a major burden on health and economic infrastructure . PCS is a multisystem condition and occurs across a variety of organ systems. Most strikingly, the occurrence of PCS appears unrelated to acute infection severity and is commonly observed following either mild or asymptomatic infection . This article is a narrative review that presents a contemporary summary of the mechanisms contributing to PCS and its multisystem presentation, along with future therapeutic considerations.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is organized as a narrative review that summarizes new research on Post-COVID-19 Syndrome and current clinical knowledge. To gather peer-reviewed research, clinical trials, and neuroimaging/post-mortem data about the long-term consequences of SARS-CoV-2, a thorough review of the literature was conducted. The literature synthesis was limited to papers that examined systemic clinical manifestations and underlying biochemical abnormalities. To demonstrate

mechanistic linkages, collected data were matched against organ-specific domains (neurological, cardiovascular, pulmonary, and endocrine) and classified into fundamental pathophysiological drivers (e.g., viral reservoirs, immunological cascades, and microvascular disease). Clinical consensus indicates that PCS is not a single, isolated medical entity, but rather a multi-organ illness triggered and sustained by a constellation of overlapping biological mechanisms.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Core Pathophysiological Drivers

It has been largely accepted within the clinical community that PCS is not one single entity, but rather a multi-organ illness triggered and sustained by a constellation of overlapping biological mechanisms . A generalized cascade from initial viral exposure through multisystem manifestations is shown in Figure 1.

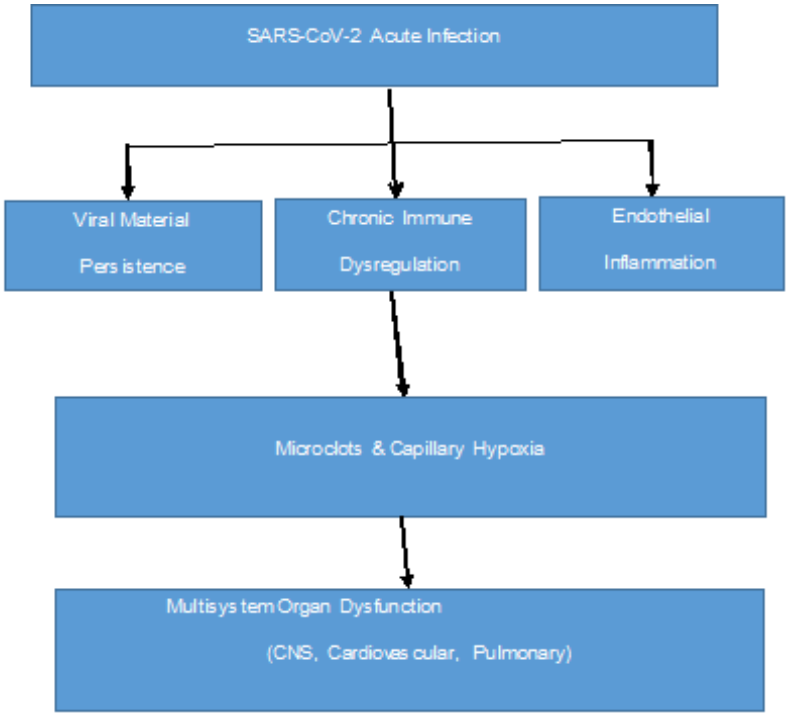

Figure 1. Schematic flow diagram demonstrating the interconnected pathways of cellular and tissue stress leading from acute SARS-CoV-2 infection to microclotting and chronic multi-system organ dysfunction.

The loss of incomplete viral clearance and viral reservoir

The longevity of highly glycosylated SARS-CoV-2 spike protein persistence in the body explains chronicity. Often, this persistently lodged structural protein binds pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) on innate immune cells, such as the non-classical CD14+ and CD16+ monocytes. Long after the acute phase has subsided, the PRR binding initiates prolonged intracellular pro-inflammatory signaling . This can lead to localized tissue injury and downstream vascular dysfunction, as shown in Figure 2.

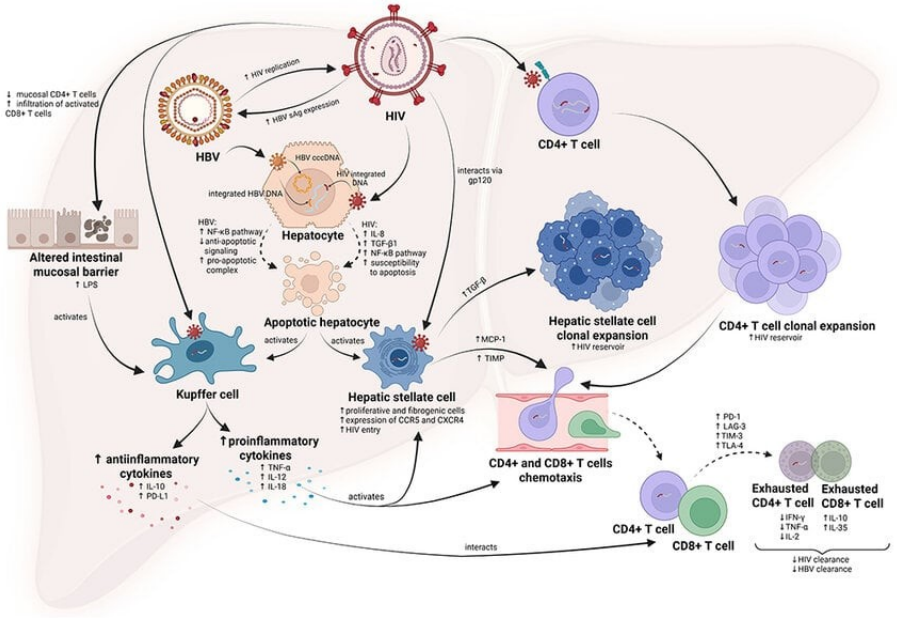

Figure 2. Viral antigen persistence mechanism. The diagram shows retained structural spike proteins that repeatedly bind pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) on non-classical (CD14+, CD16+) monocytes.

Immune Dysregulation and Autoimmunity

Persistent exposure to viral antigens brings about deep systemic immunological changes at both innate and adaptive cellular levels. In PCS, one finds constant activation of microglia, T-cell exhaustion, and high levels of systemic pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-6, IL-1 beta, and TNF-alpha . The increased systemic inflammation also primes for hypersensitivity and molecular mimicry. This may result in functional autoantibodies against receptors and vascular structures, leading to widespread organ damage and autonomic dysfunction.

Microvascular Pathology and Hypercoagulability

The blood vessel endothelium is dense in Angiotensin-Converting Enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptors and, consequently, becomes an important target for SARS-CoV-2. Persistent inflammation within the endothelium alters the equilibrium between the coagulation-fibrinolysis cascade and leads to the formation of functionally abnormal, fibrinogen-derived microclots that are not susceptible to normal fibrinolysis , as shown in Figure 3. Together with persistent endothelial dysfunction and increased von Willebrand factor levels, these microclots impede capillaries, leading to partial microcapillary obstruction, generalized tissue hypoperfusion, and systemic ischemia, which has been associated with global fatigue and exercise intolerance.

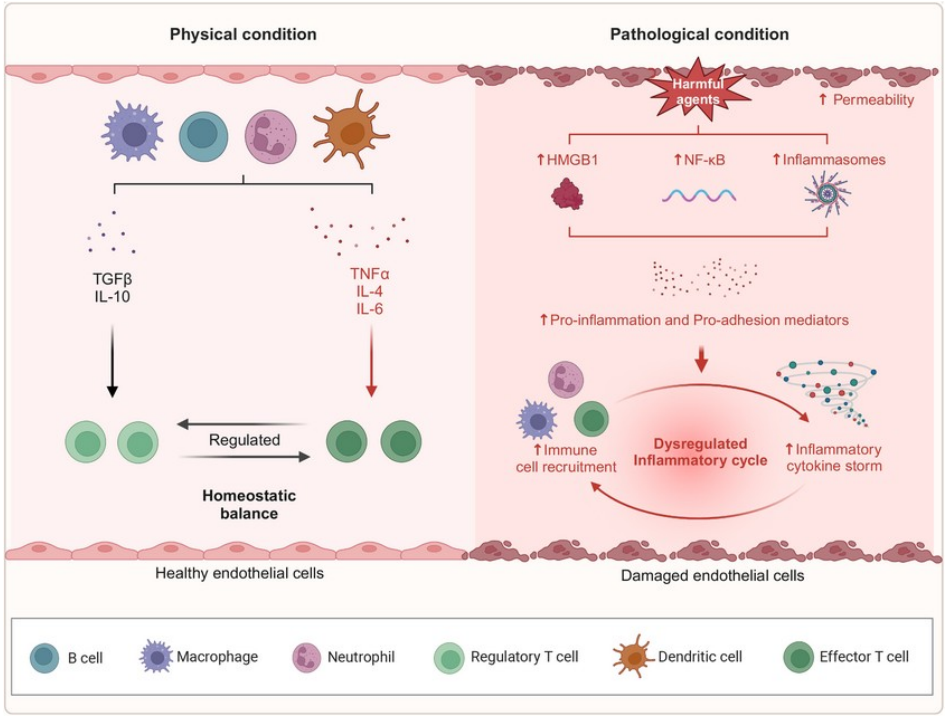

Figure 3. Endothelial inflammation and microclot formation. Chronic endothelial inflammation impacts the coagulation pathway. The blood is rendered hypercoagulable, and microclots form which are resistant to normal fibrinolysis. Obstruction of capillaries leads to restricted oxygen flow and tissue ischemia.

3.2 Organ-Specific Manifestations

These pathophysiological processes lead directly to specific manifestations across multiple physiological domains, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Organ-Specific Clinical Presentations and Linked Pathophysiological Mechanisms.

Physiological Domain	Predominant Clinical Symptoms	Primary Pathophysiological Drivers
Neurological / Psychiatric	Cognitive impairment (“brain fog”), executive dysfunction, profound .fatigue, sleep disturbances	Neuroinflammation, microglial over-activation, blood-brain barrier compromise, and cerebral microvascular .thrombosis
Cardiovascular	Chest pain, palpitations, exercise intolerance, orthostatic intolerance / Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia .Syndrome (POTS)	Myocardial microvascular ischemia, autoantibody engagement with GPCRs, autonomic neuropathy, and .localized perivascular fibrosis
Pulmonary	Persistent dyspnea, chronic cough, reduced gas exchange capacity .(DLCO)	Airway epithelial damage, localized air trapping, lung perfusion abnormalities, and .diffuse alveolar thickening
Endocrine / Systemic	Post-Exertional Malaise (PEM), adrenal insufficiency, circadian .rhythm disruptions	Cytokine-induced disruption of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and mitochondrial/immunometabolic

.failure

Neurological Syndromes

"Brain fog" affects more than 60% of long-term sufferers. Reduced gray matter thickness, cerebral micro-hemorrhages, and increased neuroinflammatory markers are shown by neuroimaging and post-mortem examinations. Chronic cognition and memory problems are caused by elevated systemic cytokines (such as CCL11) that pass through a deficient blood-brain barrier, disturbing the neural stem cell milieu and hindering neurogenesis.

Cardiovascular and Autonomic Strain

POTS and other forms of dysautonomia are very common. Chronic inflammation and endothelial damage interfere with the autonomic nervous system's ability to control the vasculature. Unchecked venous pooling brought on by orthostatic stress causes compensatory tachycardia, lightheadedness, palpitations, and chest pain.

3.3 Evolving Therapeutic Paradigms

Since there is not a single diagnostic marker for PCS, existing management approaches are individualized and symptom-based, managed by a multi-disciplinary team.

1. Activity pacing and energy conservation

High levels of physiotherapy, which would lead to increased neuro-inflammation and a push-crash cycle for patients who suffer from post-exertional malaise (PEM), must be avoided. Rather than utilizing a typical exercise regimen, the best advice would be a strict activity pacing routine.

2. Pharmacological modulation of neuro-inflammation

A successful off-label approach that has been utilized in clinical settings with a promising response in managing microglia and modulating CNS inflammation is low-dose naltrexone (LDN).

3. Immune and histaminergic blockage

Administration of H1 and H2 antagonists and mast-cell stabilizers is beneficial for reducing symptoms related to type-1 hypersensitivity reactions and MCAS.

4. Vascular and coagulation support

Due to microclots and overall hypercoagulability of the body, medications targeting blood coagulation-fibrinolysis pathways (natural fibrinolytic agents such as nattokinase) and systemic anti-inflammatories (colchicine) are in a trial phase for widespread clinical use to promote blood flow.

4. Conclusion

PCS is a complex, multiorgan disorder caused by viral persistence, chronic inflammation, and endothelial microvascular disease. Understanding the interplay between these processes in the

development of systemic tissue hypoxia and autonomic dysfunction is crucial for guiding the development of appropriate clinical solutions. Prioritizing cohesive, mechanism-driven treatment plans over isolated organ-focused protocols is paramount. The landscape of clinical management must continue to evolve through extensive, multisite randomized controlled trials in the pursuit of cures rather than just symptom palliation.

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