

## **Long Covid in Children: An Invisible Health Crisis Affecting Education And Families**

Tens of thousands of children are living with Long Covid, many experience symptoms that impact their ability to attend and fully engage with school and learning.

With national monitoring of Long Covid now discontinued, policymakers lack a clear picture of how many children are affected or how the condition is impacting education and healthcare systems.

### **Key Statistics**

**111,000 UK children aged 3–17 were estimated to be living with Long Covid** (ONS, 2024 (3)).

**This equates to around 1 in 100 children.**

**More than 20,000 children report severe limitations to daily activities including school attendance.**

**Cases nearly doubled between 2023 and 2024, equivalent to around 1,000 new paediatric cases per week before national monitoring stopped.**

**25% of infected children still had symptoms after 3 months** (CLoCk study (4)).

**Nearly one-third had not recovered two years later.**

### **Executive Summary**

Paediatric Long Covid is affecting tens of thousands of children in the UK yet remains poorly tracked. Many affected children experience severe, multi system symptoms that limit their ability to attend school and participate in everyday activities.

Evidence shows Long Covid can affect multiple body systems, including the immune, cardiovascular and neurological systems.

Despite the growing impact on children, families and schools, national prevalence monitoring has largely stopped, specialist services are closing, and schools still lack clear guidance on how to support affected pupils.

## Physical Illness is a Major Driver of the School Attendance Crisis

- **Child illness-related absence remains almost 30% higher than pre-pandemic levels** according to Department for Education data (1).
- **Teacher illness absence remains almost 40% higher than pre-pandemic**, increasing disruption and costs for schools (2).
- Surveys suggest many children with Long Covid struggle to attend school regularly; affected pupils can lose **over 20 hours of learning per week** due to symptoms.
- Promised **DfE guidance for supporting pupils with Long Covid has not yet been published.**

## Prevalence and Persistence

- The most recent survey from the **Office of National Statistics** estimated that over **111,000 children (around 1 in 100)** aged 3–17 in England and Scotland were living with Long Covid.(3)
- Between **March 2023 to March 2024**, numbers nearly doubled, equivalent to around **1,000 new paediatric cases per week** before national surveillance stopped.
- **More than 20,000 children reported severe limitations** to daily activities including school attendance and physical activity.
- The UK-based **CLoCk study** found that **nearly a third of children with Long Covid had not recovered two years after infection** (4).

## Long Covid Can Be Severe and Multi-Systemic

Long Covid can affect multiple organ systems even after mild SARS-Cov2 infection.

- **Immune dysfunction:** Children may become more susceptible to infections and chronic immune dysregulation (5/6).
- **Cardiovascular effects:** Covid has been described as ‘**a vascular disease masquerading as a respiratory one**’. Studies show increased risks of conditions like myocarditis and pericarditis (7).
- **Post-infection Chronic Illness:** A substantial proportion of Long Covid patients meet diagnostic criteria for **Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E)**. Severe cases can leave children housebound or bedbound for extended periods (8,9). When including adults, the impact on individuals and society is significant: **“Current estimates of the cost are upwards of £22 billion per year.”**(10).
- **Neurological effects:** Rising school absences are frequently attributed to mental health concerns alone, overlooking the role of physical illness. SARS-CoV-2 infection can produce **long term neurological effects**, including cognitive impairment (brain fog) and sensory sensitivities. Abnormal neuroimaging findings including brain lesions, have been reported in **44% of children with post-COVID neurological symptoms** (11).

## Other Overlapping Illnesses

- Children and adults with Long Covid frequently develop complex conditions including **dysautonomia, POTS, MCAS, EDS, PANS and diabetes.**

## Reinfections Increase Risk

- Each COVID infection increases the risk of developing Long Covid.
- The US NIH RECOVER study revealed that children and teenagers were twice as likely to develop Long Covid after a second infection (12).
- Other research shows reinfections are associated with increased **cardiovascular disease, diabetes and neurological symptoms** (13).

## Insufficient Focus on Airborne Infection Control in Schools.

- Indoor air quality in UK classrooms has been described by the Building Engineering Services Association as “a national scandal”(14).
- Most school buildings still rely primarily on natural ventilation. Most school buildings still rely primarily on natural ventilation. Classroom monitoring shows ventilation rates in schools are almost 4 times less than the absolute minimum in new office workplace guidelines (15).
- Evidence shows that **air filtration can significantly reduce airborne virus transmission and illness in classrooms**, improving both pupil and staff health (16)

## Economic Impact

- Long Covid has significant financial impacts on families, including **lost earnings and additional healthcare costs.**
- Estimates suggest Long Covid costs the UK economy **billions annually** with around **250 million working hours lost** in 2024 (17), and **£5.7 billion in lost productivity in 2023** (18).
- The long-term impacts on **young people's education, employment and economic participation remain poorly assessed.**

## Recognition and Support Gaps

- Children with Long Covid often experience **delays in diagnosis, limited access to specialist care and a lack of recognition within education and healthcare systems.**
- National tracking of infections and Long Covid prevalence has largely stopped.
- Most specialist **Long Covid clinics have closed despite continuing demand.** (19)

## Policy Priorities

### Invest in Research and Treatment

- Increase funding for bio-medical research and treatment trials.
- Ensure **paediatric trials are included, with dedicated funding.**

### Improve Healthcare Support

- Halt closures of Long Covid clinics.
- Establish specialist services in all UK nations.
- Improve clinical training and awareness.

### Support Affected Pupils

- Publish long promised **DfE guidance for schools**
- Provide appropriate educational accommodations.

### Improve Indoor Air Quality in Schools

- Invest in ventilation and air filtration to reduce transmission of airborne illnesses. The London Mayor has already invested £2.7m in air quality filters for schools (20)
- Review and update school ventilation guidance to align with current workplace ventilation standards (15)

### Restore National Surveillance

- Reinstate monitoring of Long Covid prevalence in children and adults
- Improve tracking of COVID infections and wastewater surveillance.

Germany has recognised the scale of the crisis and recently announced €0.5bn for post-viral chronic illnesses like Long Covid.(21)

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