# Nearly two-thirds of long Covid patients in Northern Ireland await clinic appointments amid rising demand



Nearly 5,000 patients in Northern Ireland have been referred to long Covid clinics since the onset of the pandemic, highlighting the ongoing healthcare challenge posed by this condition. This data, recently clarified by the health minister in response to a query from Alliance MLA Nuala McAllister, offers a glimpse into the scale of the issue within the region. Long Covid symptoms can encompass a range of debilitating effects, including fatigue, shortness of breath, loss of smell, memory issues (often referred to as "brain fog"), headaches, dizziness, chest pain, and psychological symptoms like depression and anxiety. While many recover within 12 weeks, some individuals experience symptoms that persist for months.

Since the establishment of dedicated multidisciplinary clinics in November 2021, which align with similar services launched in England, nearly 4,659 patients have sought help across the five health trusts in Northern Ireland. The South Eastern Trust reported the highest number of referrals at 1,035, followed closely by the Northern Trust with 1,012 patients. The Belfast Trust received 901 referrals, while the Southern Trust had 882, and the Western Trust accounted for 829.

Despite the establishment of these clinics, a significant backlog remains concerning patient appointments. Reports indicate that approximately two-thirds of individuals referred to these specialist services have yet to receive an initial appointment. Among more than 1,900 referrals made, only 600 patients have been seen, mostly through virtual consultations rather than face-to-face assessments. This situation raises concerns about the healthcare system’s ability to cope with the ongoing demand for essential services.

In addition to long Covid concerns, Northern Ireland is now monitoring a new, rapidly spreading strain of Covid-19, referred to as NB.1.8.1. This variant has been noted for causing gastrointestinal issues, which differ from the respiratory symptoms typical of previous strains. As of now, seven cases of this strain have been confirmed in Northern Ireland, reinforcing the need for continued vigilance in managing Covid-19 variants amidst the ongoing long Covid situation.

The Public Health Agency has urged eligible populations to consider participating in the Spring vaccination programme, which is crucial for maintaining protection against Covid-19, particularly for vulnerable groups such as older adults and those with compromised immune systems. Despite only 50% of those invited taking up the offer, there remains an emphasis on the importance of vaccinations as a safeguard against complications from the virus.

The demand for long Covid services is further compounded by the broader implications of the condition on the health system. Prominent health organisations, such as the Northern Ireland Chest Heart & Stroke, estimate that between 20,000 and 40,000 individuals in the region may be grappling with long-term symptoms. They have been advocating for comprehensive assessment and support services to address the multifaceted nature of long Covid, including cognitive and psychological evaluations, alongside physical health assessments.

As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve in response to Covid-19, the need for effective management of both immediate and long-term symptoms remains a critical focus for health authorities and practitioners alike.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/), [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61786844)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-59886159), [[7]](https://nichs.org.uk/research-policy/campaigns/covid-long-covid)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/long-covid-services-being-established), [[6]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-57462058)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/), [[7]](https://nichs.org.uk/research-policy/campaigns/covid-long-covid)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/nearly-5000-ni-patients-referred-to-long-covid-clinics-AML6AYRQURCDLH6APPNVDSA5UM/> - Nearly 5,000 patients in Northern Ireland have been referred to long Covid clinics since the pandemic began. The most common symptoms include fatigue, breathlessness, brain fog, headaches, dizziness, chest pain, depression, and anxiety. The South Eastern Trust had the highest number of referrals at 1,035, followed by the Northern Trust with 1,012. The first dedicated assessment and treatment clinics for long Covid were launched in November 2021, offering services such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and nursing.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61786844> - Two-thirds of people referred to Northern Ireland's specialist long Covid clinics have yet to receive a first appointment. Of more than 1,900 referrals, just over 600 have been seen, with 172 face-to-face and the rest remotely. The Department of Health is evaluating the current service, with funding in place to run the clinics until September.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-59886159> - Over 400 people were referred to Northern Ireland's specialist long Covid clinics in the first month since their launch in November. The assessment and treatment centres aim to address symptoms such as fatigue, breathlessness, muscle pains, and brain fog. A further 103 people were referred to pulmonary rehab clinics during the same period.
5. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/long-covid-services-being-established> - Health Minister Robin Swann announced new services for the treatment and assessment of post-Covid-19 syndrome, also known as 'long Covid'. The services include a new multidisciplinary assessment service for post-Covid-19 patients, with elements such as bespoke pulmonary rehabilitation, follow-up services for patients discharged from critical care, and strengthening psychology support to all Trusts. The services were anticipated to be established by the end of October 2021.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-57462058> - Plans for dedicated services to help long Covid patients in Northern Ireland have been delayed. The Department of Health intended to have assessment and treatment services available in all health trust areas by the end of October, but officials said the services would be in place by the end of November. In the meantime, patients displaying long Covid symptoms will continue to be treated via existing services in both primary and secondary care.
7. <https://nichs.org.uk/research-policy/campaigns/covid-long-covid> - The Northern Ireland Chest Heart & Stroke (NICHS) reports that surveys suggest between 20,000 and 40,000 people in Northern Ireland are experiencing long Covid symptoms. NICHS established the first community support service in Northern Ireland for people recovering from COVID-19 in July 2020 as a pilot. They are campaigning for a comprehensive assessment and support service to be put in place, including physical, cognitive, psychological, and psychiatric assessments, and clear pathways to ensure referral into appropriate services.