

BEAUTY DISSECTED

**BY DR FIRDOUS QUADER
MINU**

M.B.B.S, D.L.O ENT, Head-Neck &
Cosmetic Surgeon, Phone: 01841845531



Symptoms of COVID-19: Loss of smell and taste

It has been over six months now that we have been living with Covid-19. Since its arrival, we have been struggling to adjust with this deadly virus and go on with our daily lives.

When the virus first hit us, there was a lot that we did not know about its signs and symptoms, but we are now more aware. A lot of people have asked me if loss/change in the sense of smell and taste is part of COVID-19 symptoms. The answer to the question is a YES! A few months ago, it was not considered an important symptom, but now, it is confirmed as one of the major complaints from patients who have contracted the Coronavirus.

About 40 percent of patients suffering from COVID-19 experience loss/change in smell and taste as preliminary symptoms. So, anyone experiencing this should isolate themselves, and get tested, along with all members of the household.

As these are new signs, lots of studies



are ongoing as to how well patients recover these losses of senses. It has been seen that some patients recover fully within four weeks of the infection, but others have reported longer periods on follow ups.

Now, why does COVID-19 affect the patient's olfactory senses?

Studies have found that the entry point of the coronavirus is the nasal passage, and the roof of the nose is lined by olfactory

epithelium. Scientists at Harvard University have discovered that olfactory cells in the upper nasal cavity are most vulnerable to infection by the coronavirus.

The good news is that the sensory neurons that detect and transmit the sense of smell to the brain are not among the vulnerable cell types. It is the supporting cells of the olfactory sensory neurons, some stem cells as well as blood vessel cells that

are infected and cause the disturbance in the olfactory sensation. So, there is no permanent damage to the olfactory cells themselves.

As the patient recovers from COVID-19, the cells recover their normal function.

As far as the sense of smell is concerned, usually no particular treatment is needed for recovery. In very rare cases, patients do not recover fully and that becomes a difficult condition. In these cases, patients should consult an otolaryngologist.

There is a very strong relation between the sense of smell and taste. We mostly enjoy our food and our environment by smelling it. In COVID-19, even if the taste buds are not affected, without the sense of smell, there is an alteration in the taste of food. And this causes a loss of nutrition and health for the patient in the long run.

There is a well described correlation between smell blindness (anosmia), depression and anxiety. This is because much of the pleasures in life are related to the sense of smell — from enjoying meals to bonding with people. The smell of food, the smell of perfume, body odour, and even the smell of chemicals and fire make up a big part of our life, and security. So, if there is a permanent loss of these senses, it will have long term effects.

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#HEALTH & FITNESS

A sound mental health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as a state of well-being, in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

In simple words, mental health does not only reflect presence and absence of a mental disorder or disease. It determines whether an individual is in any kind of mental turmoil or whether s/he is in correct state of mind, and is such a factor that influences both physical health and the



entire functionality of a person.

This is such an important issue that October 10 is designated as World Mental Health Day, which was first initiated in 1992 by the World Federation for Mental Health, to create and spread awareness through myriad activities.

But, how well are we actually acquainted with the importance of mental health?

A few statistics will help answer this question. The WHO estimates that each year, approximately one million people die from suicide (which is roughly one death every 40 seconds), and 264 million people are affected by clinical depression annually.

Both of these signify one thing — how

poorly mental health is regarded and how well it is ignored.

We pay the maximum attention to our physical health, visit doctors regularly, go for regular check-ups, etc. But our mental health stays unattended and forgotten. Most importantly, we fail to address it with the care and attention it requires.

Looking at the Bangladeshi context, the situation is worse.

The awareness on mental health is so poor that the topic is sort of a taboo. A person of poor mental health is scared to share with others and keep it all in, for fear of being misjudged or shamed.

In our society, a poor mental condition or depression is often regarded as just a 'phase' or an excuse.

To make matters worse, there is severe lack of experts who can help victims to overcome their poor state of mind. Psychotherapy or mental counselling seem to be way off our league and inaccessible. Finding a psychotherapist or mental counsellor is not even close to how easily one can find other specialists like dentists, gastroenterologists, etc.

Such ignorance is what aggravates conditions and eventually starts taking heavy toll on physical health or in more severe cases, lead people to take some very bad decisions from which there is often no

coming back.

It is high time we

Spread Awareness — teach people what mental health is and educate them that it does exist!

All institutions must have mental counselling units — students, especially high school and university students, are a very vulnerable group and there should be availability of accessible experts who can help them overcome this, while maintaining absolute confidentiality. Workplaces should also have such facilities.

All hospitals must have mental health departments — just like hospitals have different specialised departments, there should be a completely separate mental health unit with the best, skilled psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and counsellors.

Be willing to listen to others — at times, all one needs is somebody who will listen. The best possible treatment is as simple as giving someone company and trying to understand.

More people must be encouraged to pursue higher education in subjects related to mental health, so that adequate experts do not become a limiting factor.

By Faiza Khondokar

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