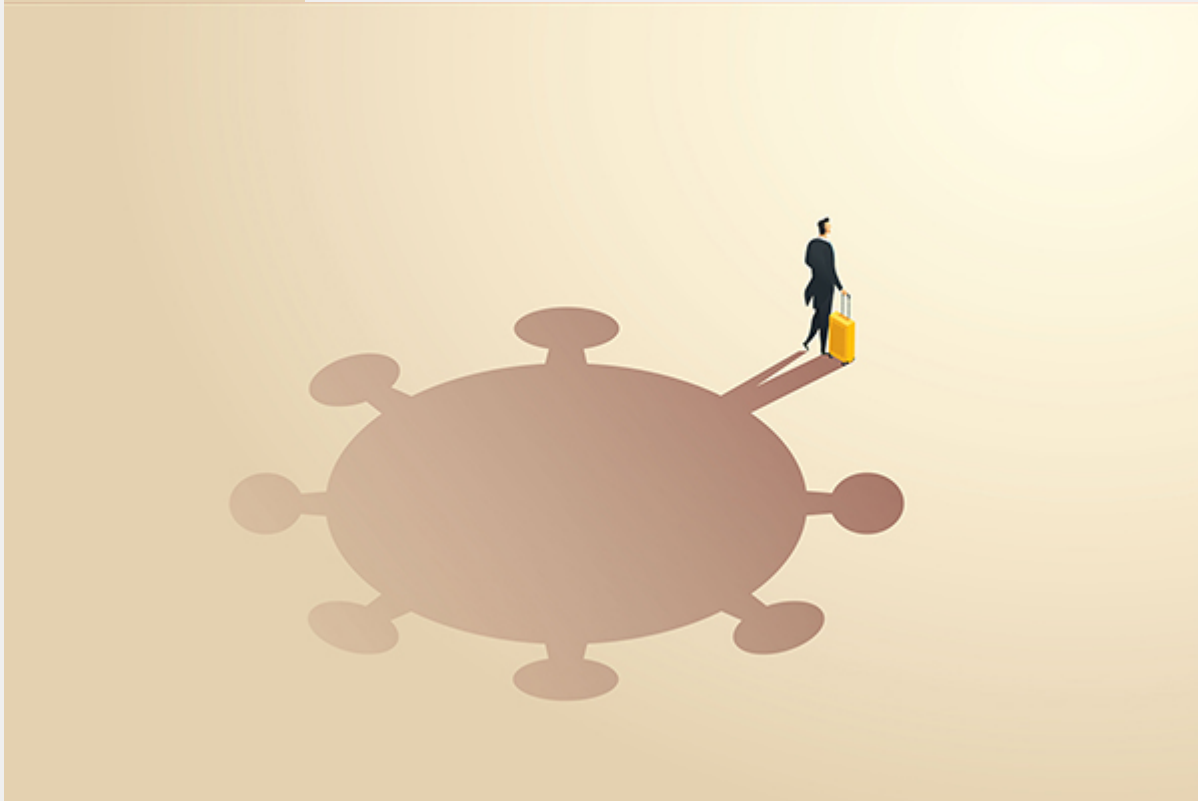


COVID's Long shadow



As the rate of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths plummet across the U.S., we're breathing a sigh of relief—COVID is finally on the wane. My hometown of New York is starting to come alive, as restaurants and entertainment venues fill up with jubilant returnees. But COVID's long shadow will be with us for quite some time.

CDC quietly lowers early childhood speech standards: In a stealth move, the CDC moved the goal posts on a critical milestone for language acquisition for toddlers. Previously 24 months for attaining 50 words, it's been revised to 30 months. In the context of mask mandates for children, the change is a stark reminder that a whole cohort of youngsters haven't had essential visual input for speech development. The reason for the change? The CDC couldn't find enough children who could speak 50 words at age 2! Experts in pediatric speech pathology decried the CDC action. Talk about lowered expectations!

The use of cleaning products and its relationship with the increasing health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic: Massive amounts of disinfectants were used—unnecessarily—to decontaminate surfaces. We were encouraged to use hand sanitizers laced with toxic chemicals. This new study highlights an alarming increase in skin and respiratory problems among those exposed. Not to mention the deleterious effects to the environment and the hormonal effects of endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

Pandemic upends breast cancer diagnoses: Study documents fewer early-stage and more late-stage breast cancer diagnoses as patients delay care: There's an uptick in advanced cancer diagnoses. The researchers conclude the results *"suggest that concerns and consequences caused by the pandemic have prompted at least some patients to delay routine health care, such as screenings or doctor visits, that might have revealed early stage diagnoses."* The same trend is emerging for other cancers and medical conditions that might have been more amenable to treatment if detected early.

Years of life lost during the pandemic significantly higher in deprived areas, study finds: A funny thing happened during the pandemic: There were far more deaths, but only about a third of them were directly attributable to COVID. Many were "deaths of despair" due to alcoholism, suicide, violence and drug use. The poor and unemployed were disproportionately affected. COVID may recede, but the underlying causes for these excess deaths remain. We're doing worse than many other advanced countries in coping with this "other pandemic."

Nearly 1 in 5 Health Care Workers Have Quit Their Jobs During the Pandemic: Burnout and foolish policies that resulted in the firing of health care workers who refused vaccinations and boosters (many who'd had COVID and thus had natural immunity) resulted in a mass-defection of first-line providers. Many doctors in private practice couldn't weather the lockdowns, and took early retirement.

Americans less likely to have sex, partner up and get married than ever: COVID has even made us less sexy: The 2021 General Social Survey revealed that 26% of Americans over 18 didn't have sex once in the past 18 months; it's the first time that the percentage of Americans who had sex once a month or less has topped 50% (by comparison, in 1989, only 36% of Americans had sex less than once a month). Blame fewer couples living together, aging populations, the effects of lockdowns and social isolation, the "ick" factor associated with hooking up, increased anxiety and depression which saps libido, decreased metabolic fitness that undermines sexual performance, ubiquitous endocrine disruptors in the environment, not to mention the pervasiveness of online porn during the pandemic, creating unrealistic expectations for in-person sex.

Long COVID: 'Mass disability event' warning for virus sufferers: A certain percentage of those who contracted COVID—estimates range from 10-50%—will languish with an array of baffling symptoms. These include fatigue, exercise intolerance, muscle aches, heart palpitations, breathlessness, brain fog, and lightheadedness. Some COVID sufferers may permanently lose their taste and smell. Long COVID or Long-Haulers' Syndrome resembles Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) and so-called chronic Lyme Disease. Some skeptics label it psychosomatic, but it's accompanied by well-characterized markers of inflammation and immune dysregulation. An intriguing theory suggests that it is, in part, "all in the head", not in the imaginary sense, but as a verifiable biomedical entity: *"Interestingly, stress induces the release of corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) from the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus. CRH activates glial-cells and mast cells through CRH receptors and releases neuroinflammatory mediators."* Thus, the stress of feeling ill results in a feed-forward mechanism that perpetuates Long COVID. Hopefully COVID will become the impetus for more research on treatments for oft-ignored CFS.

Polarization: COVID has heightened the political divide. Hotly contested issues over its management—vaccine mandates, masking, lockdowns—have pitted Americans against each other, with the media and politicians exploiting the divide. The number of Americans who report that politics is affecting their mental and physical well-being is soaring. 4 in 10 Americans cite politics as a major stressor in their lives. *"50 to 85 million people blame politics for causing fatigue, feelings of*

anger, loss of temper, and triggering compulsive behaviors.” It’s taking a toll on our sleep and increasing the incidence of stress-related problems like high blood pressure, headaches and back pain.

The “COVID-15”: Recognized early as a consequence of lockdowns, gym closures, and the ubiquity of fast-food deliveries, there’s no question that our metabolic fitness as a nation has deteriorated. What the long-term consequence will be for our societal health is unknown. We desperately need a period of healing to overcome the deficits COVID has produced.