For COVID-19 Patients, Recovery Often Takes Months

Some patients report breathing problems, irregular heart rates, muscle aches and difficulty concentrating post-COVID.

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Across the Midwest, COVID-19 cases are rising. And some survivors are still recovering — months after coming down with the disease. Karen Campbell is one of them.

At first, Campbell didn't even consider the possibility she had the disease.

"I had fallen and I thought of broke a rib," she says. "That's how it started."

Her doctor took a chest x-ray and called for a COVID test because Campbell also was running a fever. It took a few days for the results to come in, but she didn't have time to worry.

"I guess I was starting to get sick, really sick, and I didn't even think about those tests," Campbell recalls.

The test came back positive.

Campbell, 61, isn't sure how she was exposed to the coronavirus. After the pandemic began, she limited her activities to essential errands and her job as a home health aid.

"After three days, I was having a hard time breathing, kept running a temp, lost my appetite. And just, I felt like I was out of my head," Campbell says.

Campbell lives with her daughter, Kenley Coleman in Marion, a small city in southern Illinois. Coleman also tested positive for COVID-19 but only experienced minor symptoms. Coleman took care of her mother, and became increasingly concerned as the days went by.

"You know your mom, you know how they used to act before, then you can just tell the difference," Coleman says. "And I could feel it was different, like she just really wasn't comprehending what I was saying."

Early one morning, Coleman woke to find her mother struggling to breathe. They went to a hospital that was on a coronavirus lockdown.

“I couldn’t even go in with her. I had to pull up at the emergency exit, and I got out and just told them she is COVID-positive,” Coleman says.

Campbell doesn’t remember that trip to Herrin Hospital’s emergency room or the early part of her stay.

But she remembers a nurse named Casey. “He was firm about the stuff he was telling me to do, to breathe in and he would just hold my hand or pat it."

Casey Goines, who volunteered to work on the COVID-19 unit, remembers her as well — and how fast her symptoms worsened.

“With Karen, she went down here very quickly. But the thing I most remember about Karen was she was such a fighter,” Goines says.

As Campbell continued to get sicker, doctors and nurses told her family she might not pull through.

“Telling them that, you know, we’re going to do our best but this might not be the best outcome. It’s probably one of the most heart wrenching things you could ever tell a family in your life.” Goines says.

Campbell says the turning point came when she was treated with Remdesivir and convalescent plasma, which is taken from people who had recovered from the disease. It was a risky decision, because she was the first patient at Southern Illinois Healthcare to do so, as part of a Mayo Clinic program designed to test the use of convalescent plasma in treating COVID-19.

The treatment worked. Campbell never needed to go on a ventilator.

Still she had a long road ahead. She’d lost a lot of weight and was so weak even things like sitting up and eating were a challenge. Goines was there for her.

“When I started feeling better he was like, okay, you’re gonna sit up today,” Campbell says. “And I was thinking, oh my God, that’s hard.”

Campbell spent nearly a month in the hospital. Two weeks of that were spent doing rehabilitation. She left the hospital in late June, but still has outpatient therapy, where she works on walking without a mobility aid and regaining her strength.

That long recovery is common among COVID-19 patients.

At Yale’s post-COVID-19 treatment program, patients report breathing problems, irregular heart rates, muscle aches and difficulty concentrating. And research into other coronaviruses has shown high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety six months following severe cases.

Campbell isn’t discouraged. When she was discharged, she could hardly take two steps without struggling for breath. Now she’s able to walk without using a walker.

“Sometimes you know, I might get a little wobbly,“ she says. ”But I’m good, I think."

She hasn’t figured out if she’ll be able to return to work. She wants to — but her daughter isn’t as convinced.

“No, I don’t think [she] should go back,“ Coleman says. ”I’m not ready for [her] to go back. But you know, at the end of the day, that’s not my call.”

Her mom’s still a fighter.

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