

Patient's Perspective

My tête-à-tête with COVID...!

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Looking back, it must have been on that warm May evening when I felt drained of energy whilst watching a film with my daughter. She had been waiting for that Friday evening to spend time with me and I didn't have the heart to tell her I needed to go to bed. I survived the film, but the weekend was spent in bed. Whilst I did think of COVID (remember this was in May and the pandemic was raging in the UK!), I had no COVID related symptoms and therefore passed it on as a combination of work, chores and childcare – nothing a lazy restful weekend can't fix, right? And so it did! Got back to the 'new normal' on Monday – working from home, home schooling, long bike rides/walks over the weekend.

A good few weeks passed, and I felt a similar state of exhaustion at the start of the week, but this time with greater intensity. This was compounded by a severe headache - I remember complaining to my colleagues about it. By mid-week, my asthma wasn't great either and I asked my respiratory consultant for advice (this was my week one). Although still not feeling a hundred percent, by the end of the week, I felt I was recovering. I rested over the weekend, but could not start work in earnest the following Monday on account of breathlessness, intense and insistent fatigue. My GP suggested I see a doctor at a local respiratory center, where the checks came normal but decided I should go to the hospital for some further checks as a precaution.

The test results seemed to suggest my lungs were not a concern. I was able to convince them to allow me to get

back home, although I was put on their radar, as they suspected it may be post-COVID recovery, so passed the point of infection and therefore not required to self-isolate.

It was difficult for me to fathom that my increasing weakness was anything to do with COVID (and must admit I was in denial to start with!), given I had very limited interaction with the world since March, I am fit and lead a healthy lifestyle. Touchwood the family was safe. I took a swab test that week (admittedly had to tweak my answers online to get a test as I had no COVID symptoms) and as was expected by the medical professionals my test results were negative.

Things went steadily downhill from here and the next few weeks were a blur! I went suddenly from someone who regularly ran or cycled a good distance to someone who could not walk a flight of ten stairs without stopping multiple times to catch my breath. I was fatigued and breathless, like I have never experienced before. Lifting my head, walking a couple of steps, eating a few spoonful of food, and lifting my phone seemed like a big achievement. I would wake up in the morning, feel less tired for about ten minutes before being exhausted again! The steroids and antibiotics along with increased dosage of my corticosteroid inhalers and tablets helped but made minimal difference in reducing my condition. My blood

pressure was low below acceptable limits and I also developed a severe reflux. Frankly, I felt battered!

My general state of severe breathlessness, fatigue and weakness continued for almost a month. It was only from the fifth week onward that I started feeling a bit human again. I could take a few steps, could go out to the garden (for the first time in weeks) and sit up with the family, although I still needed to rest frequently.

11 weeks on it is comforting to say, I am recovering, albeit slowly with some good and some less good days. I have got back to working from home, can walk for about 20 mins, do some household chores, bake (as that is my hobby) and can usually pull through the day. Having said that, my energy levels are nowhere close to normal me and I have understood I need to be patient with myself. The recovery is not a sprint and I gradually need to condition myself back to normalcy. I can't imagine getting on a bike or go out for my runs, and I have been advised by the doctors that I should not push to do that just yet!

So while the jury is still out on the all-important question on whether I had COVID or not, I was introduced to the concept of 'Long-COVID' by my consultant. He suggested I write this article to raise awareness and make sure that people understand that this unexplained suffering is 'real'. What was also difficult was explaining everyone around me, trying to help solve it for me with logical explainable conditions (could it be fatigue, stress or some other condition).

COVID has been so hard on most people in many ways. I am managing to pull through because of my amazing family, my wonderful friends, my supportive colleagues and my doctors at the surgery (doctors' clinic), at the respiratory center and my consultant. This article is for you people out there, who I hope don't experience any of this but if you do, hang in there – you may not be part of the "official count" but you are certainly not alone! Rest up, give it time and you will eventually overcome it.

Stay safe folks!

