

Patient Recovering From COVID-19: 'i Never Thought I'd Go Through This'

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ALTON - Fred Dykeman recalls being in a hospital ICU bed, dreaming about the day he would once again walk into the gym where he worked out for an hour a day, seven days a week. That was before the 80-year-old man from Godfrey wound up spending a month-and-a-half in the hospital for COVID-19.

Dykeman wasn't vaccinated against COVID-19. He didn't think he needed to be because he was so healthy. For his age, it was striking he had no underlying medical conditions and he was in excellent physical shape due to his commitment to working out regularly.

"It could happen to you, no matter how good you feel, no matter how well you take care of yourself. Please get tested. Get vaccinated. Do what's necessary. You do not want to go through what I had to with any part of this."

What he went through, starting in January of last year, was two hospital stays totaling more than 40 days. It began when he and his wife Marilyn decided to get tested at a public site. Neither had symptoms but they were starting to get concerned because of rampant community spread. After a positive test result, his granddaughter, an OSF HealthCare nurse, gave him a pulse oximeter. Upon learning his levels had dropped dramatically, she rushed him to OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony's Health Center in Alton, Illinois. His oxygen level was in the 50s. A typical healthy person has a level of 95% or higher.

He avoided a ventilator but was given an oxygen mask. A self-admitted "bad patient," Dykeman managed to be released but was readmitted two days later with a collapsed lung. He couldn't breathe and it was scary.

He was lonely, too, but he was in no shape for visitors.

"I sure couldn't stand up, I couldn't sit up. I couldn't roll over. It was an awful thing. I never dreamed I'd be in that shape but here I am and it was awful."

In fact, Dykeman's doctors told him it was a miracle he survived because the virus had ravaged his system. Recovery would be a big challenge.

Physical therapy started in the hospital, then in a skilled nursing facility, then an occupational therapist visited in his home, followed finally by outpatient therapy for an hour, twice a week.

He explains, "They taught me how to chew, how to swallow. It was an unbelievable thing. I never thought I would go through anything like that but there I was and I kept working, working and working, and I still am today."

That dogged, single-minded determination is what Dykeman's physical therapist Debbie Fisher says makes Fred and wife Marilyn some of the more memorable people she's met in her career.

“If they’re not engaged in the program and they’re not onboard doing what we say, it doesn’t go anywhere. He was all in, his wife was all in and it was a treat.”

Fisher says with people recovering from COVID-19, she first assesses strength, balance and endurance and how they’re functioning now compared to before they were infected.

COVID-19 can affect multiple organs and systems in the body. The immune response triggers inflammation that can make previous problems worse.

Fatigue is one of the biggest challenges.

“You sometimes don’t know how they are going to respond to exercise until a couple of days after with some of the COVID patients so you have to take it slow, monitor how they go, and then progress them as they can tolerate and make adjustments along the way.”

Fisher says many of the people she’s successfully put through rehab come to her unable to do many of the day-to-day things they were always able to do. It’s possible to have a stroke or pulmonary embolism after the initial COVID-19 diagnosis.

Dykeman came to her unable to stand for more than a couple of minutes and he couldn’t walk without a walker. After eight sessions and in-home exercises including a walking program, he was able to build up strength and endurance. He progressed steadily and remarkably. The reformed, challenging patient was released from rehab as a different person than when he came in. His blood pressure returned to normal levels, he was able to walk unassisted except for occasionally using a cane, and his balance returned to an almost perfect score.

'I Want My Life Back'

But it wasn’t easy. Dykeman started his physical therapy, feeling as others do post COVID-19 – he was frustrated and depressed.

“‘Man, I just want my body back. I want my life back.’ That’s what you hear from them. ‘I want to get back to how I was before. I didn’t think this would impact me that much.’ So trying to keep them onboard in recognizing they can’t just go back and get it all in one day. It’s going to be a long process of building up to their tolerance and then finding that balance between doing and not overdoing.”

For Dykeman and other patients, Fisher recommends either they or people in their support system try [OSF Silver Cloud](#), a behavioral health platform with a special module for COVID-19 that deals with mild to moderate depression, anxiety and stress.

Fisher says OSF HealthCare has seen long COVID symptoms in people coming to rehab for *other* issues. Many of the individuals she's helped wound up with heart-related issues that became apparent during rehab.

"If we have a patient coming in for shoulder or back pain, we ask if they had a history of COVID because we have to then have an increased awareness of what's going on with their circulatory system as we're treating them for therapy, and look for increases in heart rate or drops in blood pressure, things like that."

Dykeman is forever grateful to everyone who was a part of his care team, including the environmental services crew who cleaned his room. He recalls looking forward to seeing them during his long days in an ICU bed. Oh, and that dream of returning to his beloved Nautilus gym – it came true. He tears up a bit when asked how it felt.

"I'm getting a little emotional," he says with his voice cracking. "But, I made it. I had to work so hard and I had so many people helping me. I'll never be able to thank all of them but I did it and they helped me do it and here I am doing so much better."

Fisher was helping with in-hospital rehab for the early months of the pandemic and saw some patients at their worst. In August of this year, she also contracted COVID-19 although she didn't need to be hospitalized. But, patients who have been through the ordeal of battling the virus hold a special place in her heart.

"The isolation they went through, the fear they went through; they were just so alone and so weak and there was so much unknown that to see them go to that point, to see them at the point where they walking out the door and getting back to some semblance of their normal life is fantastic. It's why we do the job, honestly."