

## **My COVID Experience: From Infection to Symptoms to ICU and then back Home**

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Hi! I'm James, I had a very bad case of COVID in March of 2020 that put me into ICU. I was told by my Doctor that I almost died twice. Ended up with Long COVID, random arrhythmia(s), and then this past October, I had a full-on Pulmonary Embolism, COVID related. Managed to survive that as well. I've been nicknamed as "Dr. Katz" among my PCP and her staff; I'm in no rush to use up the rest of my 9 lives.

What follows is a summary of what it was like going through COVID in March of 2020, how it felt, and what happened. The purpose of sharing this is not to scare, but to inform. Hopefully this gives you the tools you need, god forbid you (or anyone you know) gets sick.

Biggest updates from two years later:

Vaccinations. If you're not already vaccinated, do this immediately.

Follow through with all needed further shots and boosters.

If you get sick, immediately talk to your Doctor / PCP about Paxlovid. Like, right now.

Don't assume a public environment in any sense of the word is safe / cleared from the virus.

N95s now, nothing less.

Here goes.

### **March 2020:**

What happened? What were the symptoms?

The very first thing I am going to tell you is this: Right now, please, try and purchase what's known as a Pulse Oximeter. This is a little monitoring device that fits on your finger and measures both your Pulse and your Blood Oxygen Content. This is important as COVID slowly throttles your Oxygen. You don't notice it happening.

This is beyond dangerous. Without Oxygen it's 911 time. Being able to monitor this will tell you if you need to go to the hospital. Anything below 96 = Emergency Room time.

So, absolute requirements? Digital Thermometer and Pulse Oximeter.

There's several stages of the Disease's progression:

\*Initial Symptoms

\*Full-on into COVID as a nasty version of the Flu

\*Emerging out of COVID's cold stage, and now into its exploratory phase

\*Breathing Issues

\*COVID-Triggered Complications (Lungs, potential Blood Clotting, Liver and Kidneys)

\*Recovery

### **The Disease and How it Started:**

It first starts off like a very nasty cold / version of the flu. I started noticing symptoms two weeks into March. You feel as if someone's stepping on your energy - you're instantly sapped of the ability to do anything.

I initially started treating my symptoms as if I had a nasty case of the flu. OTC medications: Cough syrup, Acetaminophen for the fever, Mucinex to keep the lungs producing anything phlegmy, if that was the case. After all of this my Doctor and RNs at the hospital told me to stick with Acetaminophen and stay away from Ibuprofen.

You lose all sense of smell and taste. When the disease got going, you can't move much, at all. I didn't have the strength to walk 15 feet to the toilet, and when I did, I almost blacked out. You cannot eat. Ensure shakes help here. I got chronic Diarrhea.

So, initially the thing to do is, no matter what in this stage, you need to keep hydrated. You need to keep food (or similar) in yourself, somehow as that's fuel to fight the virus. Again, Ensure was the only thing I could keep down. I didn't eat for five days in a row.

OK! You've got a 102 fever, you can't eat or smell or taste, now you move into the rigors - shaking that you can't really control. This would alternate from feeling as if you were in an Attic in the middle of July; unbelievable heat. Then you'd switch to as if you were plummeted into an arctic wasteland. Shivers and shakes that were uncontrollable.

At this point I was still trying the OTC medications, and the Acetaminophen was helping. I'd still get the rigors, and I'd curl up into a ball to try and let them pass.

You will not sleep. You'll wake up every hour, on the hour. This will, unfortunately become the norm for about 1 to 1.5 months.

I emerged from the other side thinking that the disease was over. I'd gotten through the temperature swings, and was feeling better. This leads us to:

### **Second Stage of COVID: Oxygen / CO2 processing Capability diminished, COVID starts to explore:**

Once I was mostly done with the flu symptoms, I noticed that my energy levels were, shockingly, not really coming back. I barely made it into the car, and got myself over to my PCP. This now, is two weeks in.

My Doc gave me a lung X-ray and told me I had Bi-Lateral Pneumonia in both lungs. On top of that, she discovered that I also had shingles on my right arm.

Now, keep in mind, throughout this, I hadn't been tested. After the X-Ray, I was. So, two weeks and two days in, I was told that I was positive for COVID.

I cannot tell you what that felt like. For a few pauses, I felt as if I was over a cliff. The next thing I said was, "Well, nothing to do but get through this. We're going to get through this."

Which, with thanks to friends, made all the difference.

I cannot emphasize enough how mindset helped me approach this. You have to tell yourself, daily, sometimes more, that you **WILL** get through this, you **WILL** be OK, and emotionally latch yourself and not try to lose to despair. Emotionally latching oneself was a huge factor that I had to remind myself constantly of.

COVID, after the initial symptoms, now goes into what I called 'lockpick' mode. It starts moving around, looking for areas. In my case, it found both my lungs, my liver and kidneys. My urine was the color of black tea, I had ceaseless, constant diarrhea.

Two days after seeing the Doctor and being diagnosed for Pneumonia and shingles, I had significant shortness of breath. I called 911 and not five minutes later, got an exclusive ride with Portland's Finest, the Fire Dept., to Maine Medical.

Maine Med were all set to admit me, and had a gurney ready when I arrived. I am beyond thankful to the Fire Dept. as they all stood there when I got out, and cheered me on, wishing me the very best. That meant an awful lot, and I'm tearing up slightly remembering.

So, I was put in an isolation room and my blood was taken, as well as another blood sample. One hour later, I was fully admitted to a Critical Care room for monitoring.

At this time, I could barely walk. My temperature was more or less stable (16 days now, two days after finishing the 'cold' portion of the disease), but I felt beyond ill. I was wired up like a Christmas Tree, and I could see my heartrate and my PulseOx, which was floating at around 89 to 91. My pulse was 136. Little did I know that my heartrate would stay there for the next two months.

I am very, very lucky. Let me repeat that.

I essentially was over the worst initial phases of the disease, and was now being aggressively monitored by Maine Med. My blood was taken four times a day, my vitals constantly monitored. I now know this was done so they could see if I was making progress and getting better.

It was difficult to breathe. Everything was slurred together. I think I watched the entire Harry Potter movies twice while I was there. Didn't want to eat, but I could, now, keep down bananas. Temperature continued to stabilize, and bloodwork continued to show improvement. I was also given, each day, an anticoagulant. I thought this was due to me being stuck in a hospital bed. Turns out Maine Med knew about COVID's possibility to cause blood clots, and they were proactive in preventing that.

Two days of monitoring, and I improved. Middle of the third day, I was released. Still feeling weak as crap, but better than before.

I managed to get a cab ride home. I was beyond happy to BE home. Prior to going in, I typed up a Will, summarizing what I thought best. I cannot tell you how doing so made my blood run cold, and how I didn't know what the future held.

### **We now enter the Recovery Stage:**

So, three weeks after it started, I was still feeling rough, didn't really appreciate that COVID also checked out my Liver and Kidneys, and my lungs were all kinds of weird afterwards.

COVID after initial symptoms gives you what I call "Two up, one down" days. You'll get two good days, then one where your arms feel like wet noodles, and you can't do much. Two months later, I'm doing a lot better, and the 'one down' day isn't anywhere near as bad.

I came home and once I finished the 17 day run of Doxy for the Pneumonia, suddenly found myself short of breath again. It turns out that when you're in the thick of the disease, you **Do. Not. Notice.** how much it's slowly starving you of Oxygen. Coming out, you do. So, it was less that the disease was re-restricting my ability to oxygenate my blood, and more that I was now healthy to notice my reduced breathing capacity.

This improved over time, to the point today, my PulseOx was initially 96, then with sitting down bumped up to 97, then 98. Heavy breathing a few times bumped it to 99.

So, you're recovering. You'll have days where you feel almost fine, then one day of feeling like absolute crap. This slowly diminishes. You'll have a few cold shivers (terrifying), you'll see your temp hit 99.1, 99.4 (again, terrifying) and eventually, about a month later, you won't have any temp symptoms.

My poop, if I can be gross for a moment, went from full-on runs, to semi-solid, to just today, normal. This is one month from being all-cleared by Maine CDC to return to work, so even when the virus is gone, your after-effects can still hang for a bit. (Update: This changes weekly, even two years later. Long COVID is very real).

I took the initiative and with thanks to friends again showing me the breathing exercises she found, I exercise my lungs four times a day. This produces clear sputum from my lungs, and

generally really helps with alleviating shortness of breath. I also received an "incentive Spirometer" from my PCP, which also does the same. It's this hysterical gizmo that exercises your lungs.

I also was given an Albuterol inhaler from my PCP, which genuinely helps. I am weaning myself off it, and limiting its use to two to three times a day.

So, May 5th, 2020. How do you feel? Today's a bit of a weak day, feeling a bit stumbly, but nowhere near like I was a week ago. Prior two days? Completely normal. Able to do anything. Lungs are better and better, and as measured by the PulseOx this morning, doing good. I still feel slightly short of breath (which goes part and parcel with the 'bad' day), but again, nowhere near.

(UPDATE: Re-reading my May 5 entry. Boy, I had no idea how long it would take to get back to any semblance of 'normal-ish'. It's two years as I write this now, and while stronger, things are not the same. It seems to have gone after my autonomic system. I now get random arrhythmia, but only when falling asleep or waking up. EEG and EKG while awake shows nothing. Random balance issues. Shortness of breath but O2 saturation is 99. Ringing in ears, again, random. Stronger, but overall reduced stamina.)

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The moment I had symptoms, I ejected myself from work and called out. I also instantly isolated myself. My wife was a trooper and believe it or not, scarily, never showed symptoms. Ever. Not a cough, not a fever, nothing. She had full-blown COVID and was completely asymptomatic.

Ollie the Cat was also by my side (which worried me immensely), but he's fine, right next to me as I type this, and giving himself a good wash.

1. You need a Pulse Oximeter. Now. Measuring your O2 levels are beyond vital. Lower than 96 = hospital time.
2. You will need a good thermometer. You'll be checking this a LOT.
3. I did everything in my power not to get this. Social distancing, washing hands, putting surgical soap in our home, purell, the whole bit. It's three to five times as infectious as the Flu, so go figure. That said....
4. **WEAR YOUR MASK. PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING. You want to do EVERYTHING, let me spell that again E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G not to get this. STAY HOME if you can. Do not go out for useless reasons. Do NOT go to places where it's an increased vector.**
5. Stock up on OTC medications. Acetaminophen will become your new friend. Cough Syrup. Zinc lozenges (these oddly, indeed seem to help and were recommended to me by a virologist friend during the initial stages of infection). Mucinex. Things you'd normally use for managing cold symptoms.

6. A CAR. I cannot tell you how much being able to go where I needed to go, helped. If I had to wait for a bus? I'd possibly be dead. Lyft / Uber / Cabs did NOT want to know me once I found out I might be sick.
7. PPE. In this case, an N95 mask as the bare minimum. It protected me from others, and while going to the Hospital, protected everyone else.
8. Believing in yourself, positive self-talk. I am the worst when it comes to this. But when you're at the point where you need everything, it genuinely HELPS. Latch yourself, and keep yourself latched.
9. **A Partner.** I could not have made it without Kris. Hands down. Barring that, I was in daily communication with my folks. Having an anchor, even if it's remote, helped tons.
10. Clorox Puck for the toilet.
11. And that's that. I'll continue to add as I have more time. Don't get it. If you do, All Is Not Lost. You can make it through.

And now we're through the Heavy, Heavy Stuff:

So, funny story. While in the throes of COVID at Maine Med, they had to move me from one room to another. This was actually a good thing as it meant I had improved where I didn't need to be in Critical Care. I was being bumped down to the Cheaper Seats.

So, I'm in my bed, groggily trying to deal with reality, in my gown and shorts, when the Nurse came in. She said,  
"We're moving you to another room."

Me: "Cool! OK."

Nurse: "We're uh, going to have you get into a wheelchair."

Me: "O..Okay."

Nurse: "You'll be wearing your mask. "

Me: "Yup. Sounds right."

Nurse: "Ah. And then we'll have to cover you in a sheet."

Me: .....

Nurse: I KNOW I KNOW IT'S WEIRD BUT THAT'S WHAT THEY WANT.

Me: "Well, OK!"

So, I get into the wheelchair, with my mask on. And the Nurse says, "I..I'm sorry" and drapes a white sheet on me.

And I can't stop laughing. So, as we start down the hallway, I put my arms out and make ghost WHooOoOOoOOooOoo noises,

All the Nurses and Doctors in Critical Care burst out laughing. It was hysterical. As we rounded the corner, I continued and then we stopped.

Nurse: "This is idiotic. Do you want me to take that off?"

Me: "If you think it's safe."

Nurse: Whips blanket off.

And that's how I roll(ed) at Maine Med.

I genuinely hope this helps, I want you to do everything in your power to protect yourself and those you love. COVID does not screw around. I'll say that again, it doesn't screw around. It's horrifying. I do not wish it on anyone.

Wishing you the very best, and hopefully a COVID free future.

-James