What to Know About a Long Recovery Period After Surviving COVID-19

For people who were hospitalized with COVID-19, a full recovery may take weeks to months. Getty Images

- There have been more than 116,000 recovered cases of COVID-19 in the United States, which is nearly double the number of deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

- Even for people who have officially recovered, feeling 100 percent back to normal may be a long process.
- Pulmonary rehabilitation is part of the recovery process, since COVID-19 is an illness that often targets the respiratory system.

With the nonstop headlines about the spread and death toll of COVID-19, it might be difficult to remember one important thing: Recovery isn't only possible, it's the common outcome.

According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, there have been more than 116,000 recovered cases of COVID-19, which is nearly double the number of deaths.

That also doesn't account for the numerous cases of people who had milder symptoms and were never tested or hospitalized.

But even for people who have officially recovered, feeling 100 percent back to normal may be a long process. We talked to experts about what to expect during the recovery process if you had COVID-19.

Improving health and strength after COVID-19

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

has explained that those with COVID-19 who are considered recovered meet three criteria:

- no fever for at least 72 hours without medication
- improvement in other symptoms, like cough or shortness of breath
- a period of at least 7 days has passed since symptoms first appeared

But after recovering from the infection, the body may not be operating at 100 percent, especially if the person was hospitalized or severely ill. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that it can take 6 weeks or longer

for someone to fully recover if they were in critical condition.

"To maximize recovery from COVID-19, we recommend that patients work on strengthening their breathing muscles and the muscles in their arms and legs," said Dr. Farah Hameed, a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center.

Pulmonary rehabilitation is part of the recovery process, since COVID-19 is an illness that targets the respiratory system. The program is a series of

exercises that helps patients improve shortness of breath, increase their exercise capacity, and improve their quality of life.

Exercises include:

- breathing exercises to strengthen chest muscles
- muscle strengthening exercises to address muscle loss after a long hospital stay

Walking

"We encourage patients to walk, even if at home, as walking can improve overall conditioning," Hameed said. Walking schedules can go as follows:

- Week 1: 5 minutes, five times per day
- Week 2: 10 minutes, three times per day
- Week 3: 15 minutes, two times per day

Positioning

Spending many hours on your back can lead to deconditioning and other medical problems. It's recommended to sit upright as much as possible throughout the day.

Monitoring oxygen

"Some patients may have been given a pulse oximeter upon discharge from the hospital," Hameed said. "This device monitors heart rate and oxygen levels during activities and exercises."

People in recovery should check their heart rate and oxygen levels before, during, and after exercise. Normal oxygen saturation is 96 to 100 percent, and shouldn't go below 88 percent during exercise.

People may also have received a spirometer when discharged from the hospital. The device helps strengthen breathing muscles and open up airspace in the lungs.

Spirometers are designed to help people take long, slow, deep breaths. It should be used for 15 minutes throughout the day, which can be broken into three sessions.

Dealing with mental health after COVID-19

COVID-19 doesn't just take a toll on the body.

It also can take a mental toll, since there's so much fear centered around the threat of the virus and its disease. And for those who were hospitalized or intubated, the disease may have been a traumatic experience.

In fact, those who recover from COVID-19 may be struggling with how to mentally process everything that their bodies have been put through. They may even develop signs and symptoms of an acute stress reaction, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"When these reactions occur less than a month following exposure to the trauma, it is labeled under an acute stress reaction," said Jessy Warner-Cohen, PhD, MPH, senior psychologist at Northwell Health in Lake Success, New York. "One of the challenges that the mental health world will face post-pandemic is readjusting our expectations for mental health."

PTSD describes a cluster of symptoms that may arise after facing a traumatic event. Symptoms may include:

- distressing memories or dreams of the event
- flashbacks
- strong physiological reactions to reminders of the event
- avoiding thinking of the event
- distrust in self, others, the world
- persistent negative emotions
- emotional numbing
- trouble with concentration

Typically, doctors diagnose mental health disorders only if certain criteria are met. But now we're living in a situation that has touched everyone, and the expected response is yet to be determined.

According to Warner-Cohen, people with a previous history of trauma, anxiety, depression, or poor social support are more likely to have a significant trauma reaction, although anyone is susceptible.

Anyone can improve their mental health in the age of COVID-19, whether they have had an infection or not, with a variety of mood-boosting behavior:

- Engage in regular communication for social purposes while in isolation. Hameed suggests using phones, video calls, or social media.
- Eat a healthy diet, engage in exercise, and get good sleep.
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Avoid blue light exposure for at least 1 hour before bedtime.
- Consider meditating before bedtime.

For people who may require additional support, Warner-Cohen suggests professional help.

"Reach out to a mental health professional, sooner rather than later, if you are experiencing any symptoms of acute stress or PTSD. The sooner you get help, the better the outcome," she said.

Warner-Cohen adds it can help to talk to an expert and not just a family member.

"The words left unspoken are the most dangerous. Talking with a neutral party, not a friend or family member who experienced distress alongside you, can be extremely helpful," she said.

Share this article