

Long COVID Upends Lives, Even In The Young And Healthy

Dancer living with chest pains: 'I wouldn't wish this on anyone'

by We Can Do This COVID-19
Public Education Campaign

(NAPS)—Running was Rob Smith's passion. He ran every day, ate healthy foods, and had good sleep habits. Because of his healthy lifestyle, Smith believed that it was very unlikely COVID-19 would have a serious effect on his health. In September 2020, at the age of 22, Smith contracted the virus, and his life changed forever.

"I used to run 5 or 6 miles a day. Now, when I walk up a flight of stairs, I'm gasping for air," said Smith, who misses his daily exercise. "It feels like my brain is clouded, and I can't think straight. It's surreal."

Smith is not alone. Though many healthy young people who contract COVID have mild symptoms and recover quickly, others experience a wide range of new, returning or ongoing health problems that can persist for months. This condition is referred to as long COVID. As scientists work to learn more about long COVID, many mysteries remain.

"COVID is extremely unpredictable," said Dr. Catherine O'Neal, Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine, Infectious Diseases at LSU Health Sciences Center in Baton Rouge. "It is impossible to know who will recover readily, who will experience severe life-threatening illness, or who will have long COVID haunt them for months or even longer. Staying up to date on vaccines is the best way to prevent the devastating consequences of long COVID."

Symptoms of long COVID can vary. Many, like Smith, report shortness of breath and difficulty with memory and thinking, often described as "brain fog." Other common symptoms of long COVID include fatigue, pain, fast or irregular heartbeat, loss of taste and smell, memory problems, mood changes, and hair loss.

Katelyn Van Dyke, an athletic 20-year-old, contracted COVID in November 2020. Two months later she began to experience severe symptoms of long COVID. Van Dyke began having trouble remembering things, and she struggled to breathe with simple activity.

"I was a varsity soccer player in



Young, strong, and healthy, Rob Smith didn't think he had to worry about COVID. He did—and it changed his life forever.

high school, and now I get winded just from walking," Van Dyke said. "I can't remember things. It's unbearable."

It is common for people with long COVID to have breathing issues, a possible indication of lung damage. COVID can damage organs including the lungs, heart, and brain. Symptoms can last many months after COVID illness.

Recent studies have also found serious increases in the risk for many kinds of cardiovascular disease in COVID survivors, including for people who were not hospitalized for COVID. Cardiovascular risks can be significantly higher for people who have had COVID regardless of their age, race, sex, or other cardiovascular risk factors.

Three weeks after getting COVID, dancer Isaiah Smith began experiencing chest pains.

"I used to be able to dance all day," said Smith, who is 26. "But now just getting up gives me chest pain. And I can't comprehend words at times. This has honestly been a very scary journey. I'm telling my long COVID story because I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

The risk of contracting long COVID is real—especially for those who have not been vaccinated and boosted. Remaining up to date on vaccinations provides the best protection against severe illness and long COVID.

Learn More

For accurate, science-based information about vaccines, visit www.vaccines.gov.