

BROADCAST-Patient recovering from COVID-19: 'I didn't think I would go through this'

Fred Dykeman (pronounced DIKE-mun) found himself in an ICU bed with COVID-19 last January, dreaming of a day when he would one day walk back into his community gym. The 80 year-old from Godfrey wasn't vaccinated against COVID-19. He didn't think he needed to be because he was so healthy. He worked out for an hour-a-day, seven days a week before he contracted the virus.

"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." (:21)

He was lonely spending more than 40 days in an ICU bed, 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." (:16)

Dykeman had in-hospital physical therapy, therapy in a skilled nursing home, followed by occupational therapy in his home and eventually outpatient physical therapy. He had to re-learn everything.

"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." (:18)

Physical therapist Debbie Fisher at OSF HealthCare Rehab in Alton, Illinois says Dykeman and his wife Marilyn are 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." (:12)

COVID-19 triggers an inflammatory response and can impact every organ in the body. Fisher says fatigue is one of the biggest challenges rehabilitating people recovering from the infection.

"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." (:14)

Just as she experienced with Dykeman, Fisher says many people recovering from COVID-19 are frustrated and depressed at the start of rehab.

"'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." (:28)

Fisher says OSF HealthCare now screens all rehab patients for a history of COVID-19 because even those who didn't have symptoms but tested positive can have issues emerge during rehab for non-related problems.

“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. (:16)

Dykeman is forever grateful to everyone who was a part of his care team. He tears up a bit when asked how it felt fulfilling his dream of returning to his Nautilus gym.

“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.” (:23)

As someone who also contracted COVID-19 in August, but who wasn’t hospitalized, Fisher has a special place in her heart for those patients undergoing physical therapy.

“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.” (:20)