

COVID-19 and Young People

There has been an increase in COVID-19 cases among young adults across the nation. However, young people have been susceptible to contracting the virus since it first entered the U.S. Jenny Julian is a 29-year-old who is living proof. Julian was hospitalized at OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois, from March 22 to April 11 with COVID-19.

“A week before, I was with a couple of my friends. We were just at their house having movie night and then a couple days later one of them got sick. And then a couple days later, I was the one that ended up getting sick and I ended up getting the worst,” said Julian.

After a few days of mild symptoms, Julian decided to go the emergency department (ED) as an extra precaution since she was not feeling any better. Because she had not heard of many young people with COVID-19 and because of her unique symptoms, COVID-19 was not even on her radar.

“I thought I had a GI bug because I was just throwing up. I was nauseous. I didn’t think it was COVID at first, because it wasn’t one of the first symptoms like the cough or the headaches that initially people thought,” explained Julian.

Upon arriving at the ED, Julian had a COVID-19 test and was hospitalized with her test results pending. Julian’s story is consistent with what physicians are seeing as the virus continues to spread.

“The recent data has shown that there is increased incidence of COVID infection in young teens and young adults as well as increased hospitalization in the same population. Young kids who have asthma, or are cigarette smokers, or who have autoimmune disorders – they are at increased risk for developing significant complications from COVID,” said Dr. Kashif Zaheer, Medical Group Director, OSF HealthCare.

While COVID-19 cases in young adults are on the rise and it is believed that symptoms are more severe in those with underlying health issues, Julian was an exception. Even with no prior health conditions, her symptoms continued to worsen and she was confirmed to be COVID-19 positive during her hospital stay.

“There were some times that I was feeling okay but then after that good feeling, I started feeling worse. It was to the point that I started having shortness of breath here, and then I had to be on oxygen, and it was to a point that I had to be intubated,” Julian continued.

Julian was scared and, due to the visitor restrictions that were put in place in order to limit the spread of the disease, she felt very isolated. Her family was able to stay in touch through daily phone calls with her doctors and care team.

“My family wasn’t there. No physical contact or anything like that. So I remember, I felt alone. But the nurses were so kind. I remember one of them. She was all in her PPE and she held my hand and she told me everything is going to be okay,” Julian recalled.

Julian recalls being surrounded by her nurses and feeling calmed by their presence and kindness as she was being prepared to be put on a ventilator. After 10 days, Julian was removed from the ventilator and was finally able to call her family. She spent 21 days in the hospital and then underwent a month of

physical therapy. Still on medications for her heart and lungs, Julian goes to doctor appointments each week and is hopeful to be able to come off of her medications at some point.

Overall, she is grateful to be alive.

When asked what she would say to her friends and young people who may feel that COVID-19 will not affect them, or who think they will have only mild symptoms if they contract the disease, Julian says “I was one of them. At first I was like, ‘Oh they’re making a big deal out of it.’ But no, it’s actually a big deal. I see people with their face masks underneath and by their mouth and am like, put it up. Because it goes through the nose and – just protect yourself. No social gathering. Be cautious.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone two years of age and older wear a mask that covers their nose and mouth in public settings when around people not living in your household, particularly where other physical distancing measures are difficult to maintain.

“One of the ways to prevent the spread of the disease is by face masks. It prevents – from your cough, from your sneezes – from spreading the germs. But also when you are having normal conversation and if you don’t wear the face mask, the droplets put you at increased risk for infection. So if you cover with a face mask, you’re protecting yourself as well you’re protecting others from getting the infection,” said Dr. Zaheer.

With bars and restaurants open and the return to school and colleges approaching, Dr. Zaheer cautions young adults to remain vigilant and to follow physical distancing guidelines in addition to wearing a mask.

“Young adults who ignore social distancing will put themselves at risk of getting COVID. Some of the increased risk factors for young adults to get infection are from crowded places, from bars, from ride sharing. When teens and young adults return back to colleges they have to be very careful with their activities in dorms, when they’re sharing bathrooms, in classrooms, in dining halls and meals, as well as in the laundry rooms too.”

For more information on COVID-19, including frequently asked questions, visit the OSF HealthCare COVID-19 digital health hub: www.osfhealthcare.org/covid19/.

If you are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and it is not an emergency, use one of the digital care options offered by OSF. You can connect through Clare, a digital assistant available through the OSF website, or by calling the 24/7 nurse hotline at 833-OSF-KNOW (833-673-5669).