

My journey through untested COVID-19

Umar Daraz Khan, FRCS

Consultant Aesthetic Plastic Surgeon
2-4 High Street, Westmallings,
Kent ME19 6QR, UK.

As we all know UK Covid19 preparation was little clumsy and late to enforce, while people were getting locked down elsewhere in Europe, we were asked to do frequent hand washing.

I worked and operated until 11th of March. Booked a basketball court on 14th March and played with my son, one to one, for a good hour. I saw another patient later in the afternoon and attended a birthday same evening. Walked back home and was absolutely fine.

Next morning got up with dry cough, sore throat, fever and body aches and pain. There was no sinus issue, no running nose. Gradually and within a day developed loss of appetite and loss of taste. I knew I had the virus, called my manager cancelled all my appointments and operations for the next week.

The muscle aches and pains were getting worse, fever was coming and going with chill waves throughout my body, regardless of how well clad I was. There was a limited pinkish blood stained nasal catarrh with chunks of coagulum coming out of my nose on forced nasal clearance. Used to need water during night as I was having dry mouth with feeling of thorns in my throat. I kept taking paracetamol and kept myself in self isolation most of the times in my house.

I kept myself mobile, as much as I could, kept walking in the house, whenever I could, kept watching TV and didn't confine to bed during the day. Breathlessness was severe even after taking only a few steps. One of my friends rang me and I picked up the phone, started talking to her while I went upstairs. She got much worried when she found me hard to breathe, not having enough strength or lung capacity to speak.

To be honest I didn't feel like talking, didn't want to get engaged in a conversation, and didn't want to read or write. Cough and sore throat got better in next few days. Nights were a little tough, couldn't go to sleep with aches and pain so I had to take paracetamol half an hour before going to sleep. I started having nightmares waking up screaming, calling my father for help. I used to have dry mouth with thorns in my throat needing few sips of water now again. Do not know the exact reason, may be due to breathing through mouth while asleep.

My wife and son used to come and get me out of this state and often slapped my feet.

I called my friend in Scotland that I will move to some hotel there and if needed to get hospitalized there and he to be available if needed as his son was a member of COVID-19 crisis team in a local hospital.

I called another of my local friends. Advice was to self isolate and stay at home and take paracetamol. There was no testing for the virus except for those who were too bad and needed hospitalization and possibly for those who continued to have symptoms after ten days. NHS system was totally and utterly overwhelmed and it was understandable. I stayed in touch with a friend every day, who used to call me from USA without failure and every morning to know how I was doing, what was going on and what best to take as medicine.

Another of my very close friend, who is a consultant in A/E, and he gave me very sound advice. It was 8th or 9th day after the start of symptoms. First, he said ‘you play sports and are athletic by nature and have no underlying medical conditions. So it is likely that you would see the other end of it without medical help. However, next few days are critical (cytokine storm) and if you get any more breathlessness, you have to immediately call an ambulance for transfer and hospitalization possibly in ICU’.

For once I thought how helpless I was, no amount of money or influence could take care of you. There was no treatment, only hope that you might be one of the 80% positive cases who would not need hospitalization. Once you are in the hospital, you were not sure you would see your loved one ever again or not. Once you are on a ventilator, you don’t know which world you will wake into, this one or the other one.

Counting of days was the hardest thing and the days were the longest. I had never experienced time moving so slow, almost getting still and totally frozen.

By this time, this was a totally private and family affair. Idea was to isolate at home and to make sure our children do not get affected. On 11th and 12th day following the start of this saga, my taste buds and appetite started to come back. Fever, body aches and chill waves started to subside and disappear. Reliance on paracetamol started to diminish especially before going to bed. Phone conversations started getting jovial again, reading became interesting and joyful as usual. Embarrassing nightmares stopped, stopped waking for water due to dry mouth. After two weeks, started going out to buy grocery and overseeing my ongoing construction project with social distancing and following all other guidelines.

A friend advised me not to over exert and to take things lightly even after crucial ten to twelve days.

Now a month since the start of illness, for the last four or five days, I have started exercises in the back garden. First with walk then added body stretches and now some non-weight bearing exercises ... including dribbling and handling basketball, all lasting for a good 45 minutes.

Best thing is that, our son and daughter are fine. We all are enjoying precious time together again while having our meals, cooking in the kitchen or watching TV. Finally the message is, although it is so scary and helpless to have this COVID-19, but if you have had it then you need to stay strong and be positive, do not give up; - if you cannot sit, keep moving in bed, - if you can sit do not lie, - and if you can walk do not sit. If you can breathe, then breathe deep.

I know a lot of people who lost their lives, some of my friends had a harder journey in ICU. Most of them have recovered except few. Unfortunately some may embark upon this journey later due to the nature of this hidden and invisible enemy and the job we do as doctors. I would say in the end that “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger”.

Stay safe and stay strong. Share your experience and journey with others to embolden them and never let your guards down.