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5 people on what it feels like to have Covid-19

The intensity of the illness can vary wildly depending on the case.

By Michael Waters | Mar 28, 2020, 11:40am EDT



From left: Tina of Buckeye, Arizona; Chuck Armstrong of Brooklyn, and Laura of Philadelphia, have all tested positive for Covid-19 and have varying symptoms.

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Shortness of breath, chest pains, fatigue, aches, coughs, fever — these are all **common symptoms** that people who have tested positive for Covid-19 are reporting.

While **the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** has listed fever, cough, and shortness of breath as the three major indicators of Covid-19, some front-line doctors, including the American Academy of Otolaryngology, suggest that a wider set of symptoms might signal a Covid-19 infection — and that the intensity of the illness can vary wildly depending on the case. Some patients **report** losing their sense of taste or smell, for instance, and while some report only mild coughs, others say they struggled to breathe. While not necessarily diagnostic for Covid-19, the CDC also designates other experiences — like trouble breathing, pain or pressure in the chest, or bluish lips — as **emergency warning signs** that require immediate medical attention.

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To understand how people who have received positive Covid-19 diagnoses are experiencing the disease, especially in light of overcrowding hospitals and a testing system that **remains inaccessible**, I spoke to several Covid-19 patients from across the US. Some had mild symptoms, like coughs and chills; others had to cancel scheduled phone interviews with me because they were feeling too weak to talk. Several reported multiple instances in which they couldn't breathe. But all had the same message: This disease is serious, and we need to stay home as much as possible to keep it from spreading to more people.

These interviews have been condensed and edited for clarity.

“The desperation I felt when I couldn't breathe was a horrendous feeling”

Luis Mancheno, 33, immigration attorney in Brooklyn

I stayed at home on a Friday morning two weeks ago because I had a lot of fatigue and body aches. Mid-morning, I started feeling chills and the body aches worsened. I took my temperature and I had a fever of about 101 degrees. For two days, I was unable to do anything. Finally the fever broke and the body aches almost ended.

Almost like clockwork, a dry cough started. Having read a lot about Covid-19, I messaged my doctor and let them know I had Covid-19 symptoms. My doctor said that there was not much I could do and that I just needed to stay home because testing was very limited and a positive test wouldn't make a difference anyway.

By that Monday morning [March 16], I woke up not being able to breathe well. I couldn't think or talk well because I was putting all of my energy toward breathing. There was also a really hard pressure on my chest that would not go away. That night, I went to the ER because my difficulty breathing worsened. The hospital staff immediately took me in and plugged me into an oxygen machine.

The ER doctor examined me and gave me the test for Covid-19. She also tested me for the regular flu and other viruses. They all came back negative. I was at the hospital for about four hours, after which the doctor told me I could go home. She let me know that they couldn't keep me there because they needed the space for patients with more urgent cases. She warned me that I needed to come back to the ER, however, if I had difficulty breathing again.

On Wednesday night, right about before going to bed, I felt I could not breathe anymore. This time it was worse; I couldn't really think clearly. I became extremely dizzy and I had difficulty walking. For the first time since my symptoms started, I became afraid for my life. My husband got me ready, packed me a bag up, and took me to the ER. It took us about 40 minutes, and luckily, by the time I got there, my breathing improved. I saw a doctor at the ER who confirmed that it was likely I had Covid-19 and who told me to go home because there was nothing else they could do for me.

On Saturday morning, as I started feeling a bit better finally, I received a call from the hospital to let me know I had tested positive for Covid-19.

It has been two weeks since my first symptoms appeared. I am finally feeling better. The breathing difficulty is almost gone, and my body is regaining strength. Covid-19 luckily only caused me temporary injuries, but it gave me a really big scare. The desperation I felt when I couldn't breathe was a horrendous feeling I don't wish for anybody.

“As a health care provider, I felt this weird moral failure of ‘what did I do wrong to get infected’”



Courtesy of Laura

Laura, 26, nurse in Philadelphia

I first noticed a headache that seemed to originate behind my eyes and through my temples [on March 16]. I had a dry cough and difficulty breathing that I only noticed when I exerted myself, like when I was running up the stairs, when I was playing with my dog, or when I tried to work out from home. I felt achy and had the chills. This only really happened in the morning the first day, and by the late afternoon I felt fine. When I woke up with the symptoms the next day, I decided to get tested.

Because I am a nurse and I was set to work in an outpatient clinic one week later, I needed to know if I should tell my boss to

take me off the schedule. I ended up texting my friend who is an emergency medicine doctor. As a health care provider, I felt this weird moral failure of “how did this happen to me?” and “what did I do wrong to get infected?” My emergency medicine friend reassured me that it wasn't my fault and that what is important now is that I take the

proper precautions. She let me know of a drive-through Covid testing site at Penn Medicine that opened at 10 am that day. I quickly got in the car with my fiancé and he took me there.

I needed a referral from my primary care provider, but since I do not currently have one, I was able to get a referral from the doctor on site and make an appointment on my phone to get a place in line. The whole process took around 45 minutes.

I was told I would get a call in three to five days if I was positive and would get a text in up to 10 days if I was negative. My symptoms got progressively worse. I ended up losing my taste and smell with no noticeable congestion, along with additional gastrointestinal symptoms and overall fatigue. These symptoms would come in waves, and there were some afternoons where I would feel completely fine and others where I felt completely exhausted and immobilized. On day five, I got a call saying I tested positive.

I have been symptomatic for over a week now. Not much has changed. I am getting virtual check-ins twice a day to monitor my symptoms via Penn Medicine's automatic texting program. I feel guilty not being able to help, as so many of my fellow nurses are on the front lines, struggling to take care of our loved ones amid a PPE [personal protective equipment] shortage, but I am happy I was able to get tested early to prevent the spread.

The most frustrating symptom has been not being able to smell or taste anything on top of having GI symptoms. It makes it really hard to eat. Other than that, I feel lucky for all the people who are doing all they can to keep people like me safe and healthy.

“They did X-rays and determined my lungs were filling up with fluid”

Mike, 57, IT worker in Seattle

I honestly thought I had the flu, a really bad flu. I was feeling very weak and achy. I felt short of breath. I had a fever that came and went. [On Monday, March 16,] I went to urgent care wearing a mask and hunkered in the corner of the waiting room. I continued

to have a difficult time breathing. Tests for the flu were administered, and while they were awaiting the results, the doctor decided to do a chest X-ray due to the cough and breathing issues.

The flu tests came back negative, so they decided to administer the Covid-19 test. That test is not performed on site so it had to be sent into a lab. Also, the chest X-ray came back showing that I had pneumonia.

I received a positive result to the Covid-19 test Thursday afternoon [March 19]. That day was the worst day so far. I went to the ER, but of course the hospital was not equipped to handle patients that were positive for Covid-19. Basically, they were containing me until a bed could be found in another hospital. They did X-rays and determined my lungs were filling up with fluid. You feel like your lungs are going to explode. Fourteen hours of hell later, a bed was found.

At 2:30 am on Saturday, I was transported to Good Samaritan Hospital. I was given a big injection of antibiotics, which made me immediately vomit. I was also put on **hydroxychloroquine** and another antibiotic twice a day. I started feeling better later that day, but still had heavy coughing fits. By the end of the day, the fluid was going down in my lungs.

On Sunday the same week, I was able to get the doctor to let me go home to finish recovering because it didn't look like I needed a ventilator and there were plenty of other patients that could use the room. My oxygen saturation was good.

Since then, the coughing fits have been horrible and extremely painful. I was sent home with a rescue inhaler and the meds to finish off. I have gone all day today [Thursday, March 26] without a heavy coughing fit. I have been careful in my movements — climbing stairs and standing up from a chair — to try and not aggravate my lungs.

I have heard that there are some out there that feel this is really just like the flu. But it's not at all. I had the flu pretty bad once that put me down for 10 days. It's nothing compared to this.

“Friends and family leave everything I need on my doorstep”

Tina, 52, stay-at-home mom in Buckeye, Arizona

I first noticed my symptoms a few days after going to Disneyland. I woke with a sore throat and a little cough. It felt like an annoying tickle. Day two, the fever set in, the cough got worse, the sore throat was worse, and it began to be uncomfortable to take a deep breath. By the time I got back home to Arizona at the end of day two, I thought for sure I had gotten a bad cold or maybe the flu.

It gradually got worse every day. I started feeling very weak, having bad headaches. My neck hurt. I was nauseous. I couldn't take a deep breath. My chest hurt, my ribs were sore, it hurt to breathe. After a few days, I called the nurse line, explained my symptoms, and was told to go to the emergency room right away. She called ahead to tell them I was coming. When I got there, they guided me through an entirely different entrance. They all wore head masks and robes and wore double gloves. I didn't see one other patient the entire time I was there.

I was put in a room and kept isolated. They ran tests and X-rays, and I was told I had the virus and had to be on home quarantine for at least 14 days with no contact with anyone. Since then, my cough has gotten worse; I haven't been able to control my fever. My body feels weak and tired all the time and is just sore. I still have the sore throat, and it hurts to swallow. I haven't left my house. Friends and family leave everything I need on my doorstep.



Courtesy of Tina

I haven't gone back to the hospital just for the fact that they have no cure and they can't do much more there except put me on a breathing machine, which I don't need yet. I pray each day that it will get better and the breathing doesn't get worse and the fever will finally stay down. It's a very scary position to be in. There's no one to ask questions to because nobody knows any answers. Just hoping tomorrow will be better.

“Just felt exhausted the whole week”



Courtesy of Jessica Mozes

Chuck Armstrong, 38, tech worker and theater producer in Brooklyn

I woke up on Tuesday, [March 10,] feeling sick. It was very minor — usually once a year I get a cold or a very minor flu. It's usually just a 36-hour thing. I had some aches and chills but nothing that I thought would hamper my day-to-day at all.

Then Thursday, I start to get worse. I have a noticeable fever, I'm very tired, so I locked myself down. That was when I watched *Tombstone* (Val Kilmer deserved the Oscar). The next day I feel worse. My fever gets up to 102 but I never had a bad cough. My fever always got worse at night and better in the morning, from 99 to a high of 102. I'd been

taking Advil PM to kill the fever, and that didn't help. I still had the fever for another couple of days.

When I woke up on Sunday the 15th, the fever was gone. The cough and the aches, chills, fatigue persisted for the next week. I talked to my doctor the following day, but his office had set up a teleconferencing situation. He said, “You should try to get tested.” I live in Brooklyn, so I went to my nearest urgent care on Tuesday, and the urgent care did

not have any tests. I went to CityMD, a walk-in clinic, and they were hesitant to give me one because I'm in my 30s and don't have prior health conditions. I told them how long it had been going, and they gave me the test. They said treat it like you have coronavirus, stay home, socially isolate as much as possible.

I no longer had a fever, but I did have the persistent cough and really bad fatigue. I was sleeping 10, 11 hours a night, no problem. No loss of appetite, no nausea or anything, just felt exhausted the whole week. I found out on Friday [the 20th] that the test came back positive.

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