

COVID-19 AND ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY

An Adrenal Insufficient Patient Who Recovered from Coronavirus



My name is Kristin Martinez, I'm a 34-year-old pharmacist with Addison's disease from New York. Knowing that even "minor" illnesses aren't necessarily minor for someone with adrenal insufficiency, I had begun to worry about the novel coronavirus in the end of January. My father sent me N95 masks, I had bought disinfectant spray, fever reducing medications, hand sanitizer, soap, water, and of course, toilet paper by late February. By mid-March, I had become increasingly anxious and was checking my temperature upon awakening, before leaving for work, and before bed. The stay at home order for New York had been put in place and I, of course, was still working. On March 20th, I decided that I'd begin to wear my N95 mask even though it was not mandatory. I simply knew I needed to protect both myself and others. Driving home from work on March 20th, just about midnight, I coughed.

This was the first symptom I associated with COVID19. When I got home, I took my temperature and it was slightly elevated at 99.6, which is unusual for me. That same night my boyfriend also started to feel sick so we opted to sleep separately.

Around 3:30 a.m., I woke up feeling much worse. I was hot and cold, had chills, and was sweating. My heart was beat heavy and fast while my chest felt heavy. I took my temperature and it was 101.1. I drank some water and felt like I was going into Addisonian crisis. I was able keep some extra hydrocortisone down, but prepared for crisis. Luckily, I was able to avoid crisis with the oral steroids. After I felt I was no longer going to vomit and crisis wasn't an immediate risk, I took additional hydrocortisone and acetaminophen.

I called my work partner at 3:30 a.m. to ask her to cover my weekend shifts and to have my work areas thoroughly disinfected. I advised her to strongly recommend that all employees wear a mask.

The next morning, I called my endocrinologist's emergency line for advice. I continued to take my stress-dose steroids, aggressively treated my fever, rested and hydrated. I was to avoid the hospital unless I couldn't breathe or truly needed emergency care. I got tested for COVID-19 the following Tuesday. Even though I was presumed positive, it was confirmed when the test results came back positive 8 days later.

The first 14 days are blur of waking up, having food dropped off in my isolated room, streaming any random show on the TV and going back to sleep. I was forbidden to use the restroom without carrying around my disinfectant wipes. My endocrinologist called me daily to check how I was doing. Sometimes I was better, sometimes worse, and sometimes the same. It's a tricky little virus, and I felt like my symptoms weren't always consistent, but they would always come back. My symptoms were extreme fatigue to the point that even using the restroom or microwave was completely exhausting. My temperature varied from normal to over 100, seeming to break 100 like clockwork each time the acetaminophen would be wearing off, and then take several hours for it to respond to the medication again. The body aches were terrible. My whole body felt painful, not soreness or dull aches, but actual pain. I also had chest tightness, chest pain, and chills. I would wake up dripping in sweat, was coughing, had a mild sore throat, and experienced headaches. Through all of this I could still breathe. That was my silver lining. I could breathe. I did not experience any gastrointestinal effects. I had no loss of appetite and was eating normally throughout with an increase in clear liquids. I had very minimal loss of taste. Things just didn't taste "as good".

Around the two-week mark, I started to feel better and prepared to return to work, but within 72 hours of being fever free, my fever returned! I couldn't believe it. My boyfriend had just started spending time in the same room with me again. Over the next 7 days, my symptoms returned, although they were milder. On April 4th, I started to develop significant neck pain. The next day, I had a mild rash on my legs which resolved by that evening. Over the next three days or so that pain worsened to the point where I could not move my neck. My boyfriend had to move and lift me out of the bed. I felt like a pancake the way he had to flip me to try to find a tolerable position. The pain was so bad that I wasn't able to sleep 2 separate nights. I was given no clue whether the rash and neck stiffness were related to the virus, but I've never felt that before. The only treatment that helped was a heating pad. Nothing else that I tried even touched it. Finally, over 21 days later I felt like I had recovered, was able to go back to work and my BF could put away the air mattress which had become his bed for three weeks.

I still don't know how I got infected, and I'll probably never know. I'm grateful that I never needed hospitalization and that I feel 100% back to normal. Even though I was eating normally and not able to move from the bed, I lost 7 pounds while sick! Thankfully, I bounced back to my normal weight within days of recovery. The anxiety of not knowing and the loneliness takes a toll on you emotionally. Every time I got truly scared, I'd pause for a second, take a breath and see if it was an effective breath. I would then talk myself down by reminding myself that I could still breathe. Family and friends would drop if homemade food and supplies. This was not only simply helpful, but they would also wave at the window; and as minuscule as that sounds, it was so important for my emotional health. Even just seeing my loved ones through the window and having people call, text, and FaceTime daily to check in on me absolutely helped lessen the feeling of loneliness due to the quarantine.



My advice for those of us with adrenal insufficiency is to pay close attention to mild signs of adrenal insufficiency and don't hesitate to take your stress-dose steroids if warranted. If you become sick, you must hydrate and nourish yourself while truly allowing your body to rest to fight off this virus. I am not one who ever has time to rest, but I truly think allowing my body 21 days to recover without pushing myself unnecessarily helped my recovery. In retrospect, I realized some things in the days leading up to becoming sick that I did not associate with the coronavirus. Five days before my first real symptom, I felt symptoms of adrenal insufficiency (nausea) and needed to take my afternoon steroids several hours earlier than usual. The day before I had sharp pain in my left shoulder and right elbow, but I thought I slept wrong.

We are currently in uncertain times. Not knowing what will happen is understandably frightening. If you know someone who is sick and isolating, check on them. A simple "Hi, how are you feeling?" makes a world of a difference. My advice to everyone is: wear a mask. Also, wash your hands often and do not touch your face with unwashed hands. These simple steps do help lessen the spread of the virus and are just good hygiene. Stay well!

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