

Just Breathe

Rehabilitation at Fort Sanders Regional helps COVID-19 survivor

It was more than just a headache. Elizabeth White, 48, woke up one morning in pain and barely able to lift her head off the pillow.

"I couldn't hold my head up," White says. "Then I started running a fever the next day." White had contracted COVID-19.

White is a positive and energetic person with a strong work ethic. In addition to her part-time job as a critical care family coordinator at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center, she is a full-time student and mom.

It takes a lot to bring down a strong woman like White. As the world has learned, COVID-19 can be a force powerful enough to weaken even the strongest resolve.

Fort Sanders Regional's Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Program (CROP/PROP) is helping her fight long-term effects of the virus and reclaim her quality of life.

"I'm glad to be able to help COVID-19 patients," says Emily Hunley, ACSM, an exercise physiologist for Fort Sanders Regional



COVID-19 survivor Elizabeth White is reclaiming her quality of life with help from Fort Sanders Regional Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation.

CROP/PROP. "The people who are the long-haulers, they need our help. We want to help them get moving again, feeling better and seeing that they can progress and can start to get back to their normal."

White is one of many COVID-19 survivors labeled as "long-haulers."

These are patients who carry effects of the virus long after it's left their bodies.

After testing positive for COVID-19 in October and then treating symptoms at home, White began to experience breathing problems. As soon as her oxygen levels were checked in the emergency room at Fort Sanders Regional, she was admitted.

She was discharged after eight days of hospitalization, finally free from COVID-19 and pneumonia. White wasn't free from her breathing problems, though. COVID-19 had taken the wind out of her sails.

An oxygen tank made the trip home alongside her, as her lungs required supplemental oxygen at two liters per minute.

Since then, it's been a part of her daily life.

For White, it meant a change in life as she knew it. She couldn't even walk short distances and she had to give up singing, something that had always brought her joy.

Having been an employee at the hospital, White was fa-



Exercise physiologist Mandy Marshall watches closely as Elizabeth White pushes through exercises on an arm ergometer, building her stamina and upper body strength.

miliar with cardiopulmonary rehabilitation and asked her physician for a referral.

CROP/PROP at Fort Sanders Regional offers medically supervised exercise programs that are custom-designed for each patient. The process begins with assessments from a nurse and an exercise physiologist.

Patients start slowly and work their way up as their strength and endurance grows. For White, the process began with six minutes on a treadmill. Soon she worked up to eight minutes on the treadmill and kept progressing.

Her exercise regimen has also included intensive exercises with hand weights,

riding the stationary bike and using an arm ergometer that's powered by the patient's hands, arms and upper body.

White experienced some weight gain during the days when she couldn't be up and active. She worked with a CROP/PROP dietitian who helped her regain healthy eating habits.

"I love pulmonary rehab," White says. "The people I work with there are so helpful. Everyone there is so friendly and encouraging. I really appreciate that."

White is still on oxygen, but she's down to one liter instead of two, and she doesn't need it the way she used to.

When she first came home from the hospital, she couldn't even walk between rooms without becoming winded. Seeing her move on the cardio pulmonary rehab equipment today, one would never guess how she once struggled to breathe.

"I can sing now!" White says with a laugh. "My mother and my daughter told me that

I'm tone deaf and I probably need to give it up, but I love to sing!"

Hunley says a large amount of credit goes right back to White. "We couldn't ask for a better patient," Hunley says. "She's willing to try anything and willing to let us help her through it."

White continues to move forward with a more active lifestyle and a song in her heart. She is grateful that she's no longer just a COVID-19 long hauler. She is now counted among those who are making progress toward recovering from the effects of the virus, one day at a time.

In It for the Long Haul

As the world continues to learn more about the diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19, one discouraging detail is coming to the forefront this year. Some victims of the virus haven't been able to shake all of the symptoms.

It is estimated that about one-third of the patients who had reported mild to moderate cases of COVID-19 are now living with "long-haul" symptoms. That means they are still dealing with effects of the virus weeks and even months after it has left their bodies.

These symptoms may include problems like fatigue, tinnitus, loss of smell or taste and what's been described as "brain fog." Patients who have survived more severe cases face an even greater risk of lasting effects.

Muscle atrophy is an issue for patients who have endured long hospital stays, and the virus often leaves its mark on internal organs. At Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center's Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Program (CROP/PROP), exercise physiologists like Emily Hunley, ACSM, are help-

ing these patients regain strength and stamina in the heart and lungs.

"Before COVID, they may have had no issues at all, and now they've had issues brand new to them," Hunley says. "We're so happy to be able to help the ones we've had and are prepared to help more in the future who may need us."

Supervised and Safe

CROP/PROP at Fort Sanders Regional offers exercise programs created by dedicated healthcare professionals. The exercise is medically supervised and closely monitored every step of the way, helping patients reach their full potential with less risk.

"They're going to be a little scared because this is new to them; they've never had any of these issues; they've never worn oxygen before," Hunley says. "We're watching those numbers. We're supervising. So this is a safe place. Many of the patients have come in scared, but we can actually show them their numbers look good. They're able to keep those numbers up while exerting themselves during the

exercise and it gives them a sense of accomplishment."

The CROP/PROP staff includes nurses, exercise physiologists and respiratory therapists, and serves as a connection to the patient's physician throughout the program. Pharmacy service ensures the patients are on the right medications with the right dosages, and a dietitian helps with nutrition and weight management.

When patients finish their prescribed therapy, they can pay a monthly fee to return for more exercise on their own. "We have people who have been here for years, so it's a continuing program," Hunley says.

As the world adjusts to a post-pandemic era, the number of COVID-19 long-haulers is expected to grow. The healthcare industry is growing along with them, always making sure that where there are patients in need, help is available.

For more information about Fort Sanders Regional CROP/PROP, visit FSRegional.com/CROPPROP or call (865) 331-1250.



Exercise physiologist Emily Hunley guides Elizabeth White through rehab exercises. Hunley looks forward to helping more COVID-19 long-haulers in the future.



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