

‘This illness is really isolating’: A nurse’s story of recovery from Long Covid

A nurse who has worked in the NHS since 1976 remains unable to return to work nearly three years after her initial COVID-19 infection, but is seeing improvements in her condition.

Colette Barnes-Davis, now 64 years old, contracted COVID-19 in April 2020.

She said: “I was off work for about five weeks, I then started to improve and went back to work part time (two days per week) in May and worked for two weeks.

“After I came off each shift I would fall asleep for hours, well into the next day. But I just thought that was just me getting over a virus, and that was going to be it.

“I’d only done four shifts, then one morning, this being a back-to-back shift, I started to feel unwell.

I felt exhausted from having walked from my home to the hospital changing rooms, which takes about 15 minutes. I walked up the stairs and my vision started to go.

“Once I got into the department, I couldn’t remember the staff members’ names. I was short of breath. My vision had gone, it was all blurry and I just felt very unwell, and I was exhausted. I phoned for my husband to collect me because I couldn’t have walked home. Because I had no energy left, I went to bed and slept for about two weeks.”

Colette developed further symptoms including joint and muscle pain and lack of concentration. She initially was not worried about her condition, as she had heard of others going back to work too soon after a COVID infection. There was a gradual improvement over the next few months.

But in August 2020, she had a relapse. This time Colette’s speech was affected – she was struggling to find words and had slowness of speech.

An MRI and blood tests revealed no problems.

Colette said: “After this relapse what I discovered was that I had a lot of visual processing information issues. I couldn’t read more than a paragraph, I couldn’t write, couldn’t use a screen in a normal mode. All these problems were new. Watching TV and turning pages over quickly in a recipe book was draining my energy, as the changing colours and shapes of the pictures required processing of this information. When I was a passenger in the car, I had to look down rather than look out of a window because the changing of the scenery outside the window was making me tired.”

In time, Colette started to see signs of recovery.

She said: "In November 2021 I got my creative and imaginative thought back - which was weird because I didn't even know I'd lost it. But I woke up one morning with a load of noise in my head and ideas and thoughts.

"The increase in cognitive ability appeared to bring about my second relapse. Although I now had creative thought, I was struggling to get out of bed, I had lost all my physical energy, and I was sleeping more. Everything was an effort - going downstairs, making a cup of tea, I was worn out.

Now, I am picking up again and doing a few more bits and pieces. I'm doing about 20 minutes yoga at home or I can do a very mild dance routine. Dancing motivates me - it helps my mental health.

"This illness is really isolating because you've got no energy to go out anywhere to do anything. Since I first got Covid, I haven't really gone outside of the house more than once or twice a month.

"From what I did previously, I've had to scale back massively. My life has changed compared to what it was - I have grandchildren and I just used to look after them, but I can't do that now. Driving is obviously out. I was just full power all the time and then this, it is just so frustrating."