

HEALTH

Cocoa Beach man recovers from Covid-19 after receiving convalescent plasma

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Back in March, Mark Twentyman, like many Americans, was not too worried about COVID-19.

The 68-year-old Twentyman, who divides his time between Cocoa Beach and the Northeast, went skiing with buddies in Vail, Colorado.

“We arrived when the local news noted the first coronavirus positive case in the area,” said Twentyman.

After several days of skiing, the friends went their separate ways as Twentyman headed home.

Two of Twentyman’s friends came down with what they thought was a nasty flu. A third got the sniffles. Twentyman felt fine.

“I thought I had dodged the bullet,” he said.

It turns out Twentyman was very, very wrong.

“I started feeling bad the following week,” he said.

It went from bad to worse, as the real estate broker entered the scary world of COVID-19.

An ambulance rushed him at Health First Cape Canaveral Hospital where he spent the next 29 days fighting for his life in the hospital’s ICU. He endured a tracheotomy, ventilator and assisted breathing for three weeks. At one point his lungs collapsed and one ruptured. He could not move.

“I didn’t have enough energy to push a button,” he said. “I believe the doctors thought I wouldn’t make it.”

Twentyman, however, had a guardian angel in his daughter-in-law, Dr. Evelyn Twentyman.

“It was just dumb luck that I had a daughter-in-law working at the CDC,” he said.

Dr. Twentyman received convalescent plasma therapy, an experimental treatment for people with severe COVID-19 disease. The therapy utilizes plasma from the blood of individuals who have recovered from coronavirus and have developed antibodies to fight off infections.

Fortunately for Twentyman, one of the friends who had recovered from the virus had been enough ahead of him in the progression of the disease to donate plasma for him.

“It saved my life,” said Twentyman. “The doctors said they had never seen such a quick turnaround.”

According to Twentyman, he was among the first in the country to receive convalescent plasma therapy.

While Twentyman made it alive, he was not out of the woods and he would spend months at Kindred Hospital and later at Sea Pines Rehabilitation Hospital, both in Melbourne. He was eventually released in July, but now faces more months of therapy to address the partial paralysis of his vocal cords, his trouble walking, bed sores, plus other serious issues related to his bout with COVID. He lost 50 pounds in four months.

It is interesting to note that Twentyman and his friends all have Type A blood.

“Blood type can afford some immunity,” said Dr. William Catena with the Division of Infectious Disease at TEPAS Healthcare in Melbourne. Catena was one of the attending physicians for Twentyman.

Type A may not be the best type to have with the disease. According to a study reported by the New England Journal of Medicine, your blood type may increase your chances of avoiding the disease.

Researchers have found individuals with Type A blood were at higher risk than non-A blood groups. If your blood group is O, you may have hit the jackpot, since that group was associated with the least risk of acquiring coronavirus.

Granted, the study, which compared 1,600 virus patients with respiratory failure and 2,000 healthy individuals, was not huge, but researchers feel it is still significant. A theory is that Type O folks have both A and B antibodies, while the Type As only have a B antibody and Type B only have the A antibody in their plasma.

Blood type may also play a factor in blood clots, strokes and thromboembolisms observed with virus patients. Again, Type A seems more susceptible to pulmonary embolism and deep vein thrombosis than the Type O blood group.

While many think a COVID-19 test is not necessary unless you are feeling sick, Catena begs to differ.

“The more people we test, the better it is, because it will help us identify a population who may not know they are infected,” said Catena.

Viral tests are used to check if you are harboring the infection. An antibody test may reveal if you had a previous infection.

Antibodies may provide protection against picking up the disease again, but then again, maybe not.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention note that “we do not know how much protection the antibodies might provide or how long this protection might last.”

Convalescent plasma has a reputation as a potentially lifesaving treatments of infections that appear quickly and for which no treatments or vaccines are yet available.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has sought the help of the American Red Cross in identifying prospective COVID-19 convalescent plasma donors and to make it available to hospitals treating coronavirus patients.

The Red Cross asks individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 and are now symptom-free to consider donating convalescent plasma to help save the lives of patients battling the disease.

The plasma could potentially also help those moderately ill from the virus from experiencing more complications.

During the donation, blood is drawn and sent through a machine that collects the plasma and returns the red cells, along with some saline, back to the donor. The process does take longer than a regular whole blood donation.

Magic bullets to keep the disease away are just not there yet, said Catena. Supplements such as zinc, vitamin D and ascorbic acid, or vitamin C, which have all been touted as preventatives for COVID-19, have not been proven effective.

“There is no robust scientific data in support of improved outcomes with COVID-19 with these supplements,” Catena said.

The problem is that there is coronavirus, and then there is coronavirus. Common colds are typically caused by a type of coronavirus that may react to supplements such as zinc, which can offer some relief from these viruses.

With COVID-19, however, there is still no sound science to back the claim, and these supplements can be too much of a good thing.

For example, individuals who overindulge in zinc for extended periods can develop lower immunity and low levels of HDL cholesterol, the “good” cholesterol to have, says the National Institutes of Health.

Twentyman, who once did not give coronavirus much thought, now realizes he took a huge gamble, and lost.

“People need to take the virus seriously,” Twentyman said. “I thought it was not going to happen to me.”

TEPAS Healthcare, 1140 Broadband Dr., Melbourne, offers COVID-19 testing consultations with Board-Certified Infectious Disease Specialist Dr. William Catena. Call 321-733-1901 or visit tepashealthcare.com.