

Saundra Kleinman – COVID-19 Survivor

My name is Saundra Kleinman, and I am writing to share my experience as a survivor of severe COVID-19. While I am incredibly grateful to be alive, surviving COVID did not mark the end of my journey. Nearly five years later, I continue to live with permanent health complications that affect every aspect of my life.

I tested positive for COVID-19 on August 22, 2021. Less than two weeks later, I was admitted to the hospital with double COVID pneumonia and an oxygen saturation level of only 33 percent. My condition rapidly deteriorated, and I was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit, where I was placed on a ventilator, heavily sedated, and given paralytics to keep me alive. During my hospitalization, my kidneys failed, requiring dialysis. I underwent multiple procedures, blood transfusions, and eventually a tracheostomy because I could not breathe on my own.

After showing signs of improvement, I unexpectedly suffered cardiac arrest and had to be resuscitated before being placed back on the ventilator. My family lived through months of uncertainty, never knowing if I would survive another day.

As if battling COVID was not enough, I developed septic shock after my feeding tube became internally dislodged. Emergency surgery revealed that 5.5 liters of fluid had accumulated in my abdomen. That surgery saved my life, but it also left me with lasting damage that would follow me for years.

In total, I spent 126 days in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities. When I was finally discharged, I could not walk independently. I had to relearn how to stand, walk, and perform basic daily tasks through months of intensive physical therapy. Returning home did not mean returning to normal. It meant starting over.

Although I eventually returned to work, I never fully recovered. I continue to live with permanent lung damage from COVID-19, neuropathy in my legs and feet, chronic fatigue, and other long COVID symptoms. Simple activities that most people take for granted now require planning, pacing, and determination. Every day serves as a reminder that surviving COVID does not mean being free from its effects.

My health challenges continued long after I left the hospital. In the years following my illness, I developed Supraventricular Tachycardia (SVT), causing episodes of rapid heart rate that affected my daily life. My treating cardiologist believes this condition likely developed after my COVID illness and subsequent vaccination. Despite medication, my symptoms persisted, and in March 2024, I underwent a cardiac ablation to correct the abnormal heart rhythm. While the procedure improved my symptoms, it became another chapter in a medical journey that began with COVID.

The emergency abdominal surgery I underwent during my hospitalization also caused severe damage to my abdominal wall. Over time, I developed a massive incisional hernia that caused chronic pain and significantly limited my ability to exercise, lift objects, sleep

comfortably, and perform everyday activities. In 2026, nearly five years after contracting COVID, I underwent a complex abdominal wall reconstruction with transversus abdominis release (TAR), permanent mesh placement, and gallbladder removal. This major surgery required months of recovery and was necessary because of complications that originated during my COVID hospitalization.

My story is a reminder that surviving COVID is not simply about leaving the hospital alive. For many survivors, the battle continues for years through ongoing medical care, repeated surgeries, chronic health conditions, emotional trauma, and financial hardship. Many of us returned to work because we had no other choice, not because we were fully healed.

I respectfully ask you to continue supporting research into long COVID, improve access to specialized care for survivors, and recognize the lifelong challenges many of us continue to face. People often measure COVID survival by whether someone lived or died. I ask that we begin measuring survival by what comes after. I am grateful to be alive, but surviving COVID came at an extraordinary cost. I hope my story helps ensure that long COVID survivors are seen, heard, and never forgotten.