

Why do some people barely get sick from COVID-19 and others seem to never get better? Canada's long-haulers might hold some of the answers

May Warren

One day this past April, Tracey Thompson suddenly realized she couldn't smell or taste the chicken noodle soup she was eating.

"From one spoonful to the next, it was a complete and utter absence of sensory information," she remembers. "Like turning off a light switch."

It was terrifying for the previously "ridiculously healthy" 52-year-old chef.

But it wasn't her first symptom of [COVID-19](#). And it wouldn't be the last.

Thompson has been sick since mid-March. She was never hospitalized, advised by public health authorities fearing an overwhelmed health system at the beginning of the pandemic to deal with her "minor" symptoms at home. She's now part of a group calling themselves COVID long-haulers — people who never got better, or had flare-ups months later.

Doctors don't understand why they aren't recovering, and as the first wave of people living with lingering impacts of the new virus, they could hold some of the keys for unlocking some of its mysteries. But many feel ignored by the medical establishment, uncared for in official case tallies, and falling through the cracks of care, instead turning to online communities to crowdsource their own recoveries.

Demand has been growing around the world for special post-COVID centres, which have already been set up in New York City, and the U.K. In Canada, a major research study is tracking survivors and can assist in connecting them to help. But patients like Thompson who were told not to get tested in the spring amid a backlog are not yet eligible.

For Thompson, it came on gradually. A sore throat, nausea, diarrhea, rolling fevers, and then very quickly "extreme fatigue" and shortness of breath.

She was very sick, but not dying.

Holed up in her Parkdale apartment with her Greyhound-Great Dane mix Gordie, she thought it would be a bad two weeks, and then it would be over.

But it wasn't.

She's still struggling with episodes of shortness of breath, a feeling of empty air, she describes as like eating cotton candy, breathing but not getting enough oxygen.