

Millie Camp

ACUTE RESPIRATORY DISTRESS SYNDROME (ARDS)



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ARDS

Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) is a life threatening problem in which the lungs are severely injured. Inflammation (swelling) occurs throughout the lungs. In the lung tissue tiny blood vessels leak fluid and the air sacs (alveoli) collapse or fill with fluid. This fluid buildup keeps the lungs from working well.

- It is estimated that ARDS affects about 150,000 Americans per year.
- ARDS can occur in many situations, though it often affects people who are being treated for another serious illness.
- A person can develop ARDS even if he or she has not had lung disease or a lung condition in the past.

Learn more: ATS Patient Education Series. "What is Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome?" New York, NY. 2013. thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/acute-respiratory-distress-syndrome.pdf

I'm a survivor. In 2012, I was perfectly healthy and celebrated the Christmas holidays with my children and their families (all 15 of them). My life was filled with children and singing, and my pillbox held vitamins.

My life changed on Jan. 8, 2013. I was admitted to Vanderbilt Hospital and diagnosed with idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, a rare blood disorder that destroys platelets. Pheresis, the prescribed treatment, did not work. So I was treated with high doses of steroids and the cancer drug Rituxan, which resulted in steroid myopathy and a depressed immune system.

Ten weeks later I was readmitted, moved to the ICU and diagnosed with pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), and sepsis. Pumped full of fluids, I was so swollen that my wedding rings would not come off. My husband of 41 years began the arduous process of cutting them off. You can imagine his pain and sorrow with this difficult task.

ICU illness impacts the whole family. I was intubated for 17 of the 30 days I spent in critical care. I could not speak, much less sing, and lost all of my muscle. My husband and family vividly recall images and emotions of which I have little memory. One thing I do remember was watching the nurses and knowing that I had no way to communicate or move. I didn't even have the strength to press a nurse call button, but I thanked God for my life. At one point my oxygen level dropped, and my doctor said there was nothing more they could do. My family gathered around me, and my friends gathered in the waiting room praying for us all. I am so thankful for the whole team at Vanderbilt, who not only took care of me but also my family.

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I was moved to a step-down hospital in April where I spent five weeks and began physical therapy. I focused on one day at a time, inching forward one step at a time. I could barely roll to my side, when the physical therapist told me I was going to stand. I laughed. Nose over toes, rock forward, lock knees, and I was standing! It was May 2, 2013.

I went home in June, equipped with an oxygen tank and a portable canister. I went to outpatient therapy three times a week and exercised at home the other days. My hair was falling out and my skin peeling off, so I bought a wig, put on make-up, and had my nails done. After PT ended, I could climb a few steps and walk short distances. But I wanted more. Soon I hired a personal trainer and carried my oxygen and pulse oximeter to train. On off days I went to Curves or walked in the mall. By the end of September, I was free of oxygen. My rehab journey is ongoing. It has been two years now, and I still work out regularly. I climb stairs, sing, shop, cook, and enjoy my grandchildren, family, church, and friends.

The ICU Recovery Center was a great resource, as was the Vanderbilt Voice Center, which gave me vocal and breathing exercises I needed to improve my overall breathing capacity. In January 2014, I returned to my chorus to sing. I hope that my story pushes you to not just survive, but thrive!