

Susan East

ACUTE RESPIRATORY
DISTRESS SYNDROME



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Susan East...

My ARDS journey began in 2008. I had never had a serious illness before. It felt like I had a sinus infection. I saw my primary doctor on June 30, and he said I had a slight case of pneumonia, gave me a shot and medicine, and sent me home. On July 3, my daughter found me in respiratory distress.

Once I arrived at the hospital I was immediately taken to the ICU and placed on BiPAP. My oxygen saturation was around 42, and they tried using BiPAP for 12 hours but it did not work. They put me in a medicated vented state for seven days. When they took me off, it took two days for me to wake up. I began to crash again.

It was very difficult for my family because they could only see me for 15 minutes, four times a day. At the end of nine days I was re-vented and transferred to LSU Medical, which is a Trauma I medical facility.

Once there, they woke me up but kept me vented. At LSU, my family was allowed to visit more often. This helped with my anxiety. They allowed my hairdresser to come and wash my hair. My massage therapist would come and work my arms and legs. One of the nurses would even bring me her laptop when I was strong enough to sit up and use it.

I spent a total of six weeks in the ICU and 28 days on a ventilator. The whole time I was on a tight, day-to-night schedule. Everything I needed that could be done was done during the day, and I slept at night. There were no more interruptions, like at the other hospital. I pulled through, thanks to a change in environment and support of my family.

In July 2014 I had to have neck surgery. Unfortunately, three days into it, I went back into ARDS. I spent nine days in the ICU and only had to be on BiPAP and not vented. It was very hard on me. After my release I did lung testing and found out I have pulmonary fibrosis and 55 percent lung capacity. It was at that point that I felt I had all of the ARDS my body could take.

ACUTE RESPIRATORY DISTRESS SYNDROME



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.

People with ARDS generally have one or more of the following symptoms:

- shortness of breath
- cough (often with white or pink frothy sputum)
- fatigue
- fever
- abdominal pain (in pancreatitis)

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

Susan East...

In May 2017 I was honored to be a patient speaker at the American Thoracic Society International Conference in Washington, D.C. I followed the conference with a visit to my daughter at Dauphin Island, Alabama. It was meant to be a relaxing beach vacation. I was not there six hours when—getting ready for bed—I passed out and aspirated. When my daughter found me I was unresponsive. I was airlifted to Providence Hospital in Mobile. I was in a coma. It took three days to be diagnosed with viral meningitis, pneumonia, and ARDS. I fully woke from my coma on the sixth day and stayed in the ICU for 17 days (vented for a total of 14 days). This was an ordeal because I had so little strength.

Yet I know I will fully recover—because my goal is to one day serve on the ATS Public Advisory Board. My passion is helping others with ARDS, and this passion drives me.

Susan East was a patient speaker at the ATS 2017 International Conference in Washington, D.C.