

“But for the COVID-19 vaccine, I might not be here now” – the difference the jab has made to someone at high risk of severe disease



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Les, aged 72, has been living with rheumatoid arthritis for the last 25 years. It is a painful condition causing swelling and stiffness in joints, which over the years has limited Les’s mobility, including his ability to drive.

“Even before COVID-19 struck, I was quite isolated. The arthritis affects my feet, fingers, wrists, shoulders and knees, so getting around can be really difficult, and there was a time I couldn’t walk more than a few paces without being in agony.”

Fortunately, Les was put on a new drug therapy which is now helping to control the condition and relieving some of the pain. But having an autoimmune disease still leaves him vulnerable to life-threatening viruses, such as COVID-19.

“When pandemic restrictions were first introduced in March 2020, I was told by my hospital to self-isolate – to not leave the house and to not come into contact with anyone from outside my household. What I didn’t realize then was that I would remain in isolation for the next 2 years, and that it would put such a huge burden on my wife, who had to do all the tasks that needed doing outside of the home.”

Indeed, even the thing he was most looking forward to – celebrating his 70th birthday with friends and family, an event organized well before COVID-19 hit Europe – had to be postponed twice due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the need to continue isolating.

“I felt an immense sense of relief when COVID-19 vaccines became

available. They not only offered me protection from a virus which could cause me real harm, but, just as importantly, gave me hope that I could one day soon end my isolation. Being immunocompromised meant that I was one of the first to get the jab and, apart from a small bruise on my shoulder, I had no side effects.”

Les is now fully vaccinated and finally able to venture outside of his home, but he knows that while vaccines offer the best form of protection against the COVID-19 virus, they are not infallible – as he discovered to his cost recently.

“Most of the time, I wear a face mask and avoid large crowds, but in the last few weeks I had to attend a friend’s funeral, along with 50 other people. Most people were not wearing masks and I felt a bit silly putting one on, but now I’m kicking myself that I didn’t,” Les explains.

“The next day, I developed a severe headache, lost my appetite and sense of taste, and felt very weak and dizzy. I tested and found I had COVID-19. I felt awful for 2 weeks, and at one scary moment also found myself struggling for breath. The dizziness persisted for another 3 weeks and only now do I feel more back to normal.”

Les continues, “I’m so angry with myself for letting my guard down that one time. But I’m also incredibly grateful for the COVID-19 vaccines I got, because the consequences if I hadn’t had them could have been much, much worse.”

Despite the privations that Les has suffered over the last 2 years, he is philosophical about his experience. “Disappointments like lost holidays and parties are trivial compared to dying.”

He adds, “One of my biggest challenges during the pandemic was looking after my elderly mother who needed daily care during the last year of her life. I am so thankful that we managed to protect her from COVID-19.” Les’s mother passed away peacefully at the age of 97.

Across the WHO European Region, over 1.5 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered in total. Hundreds of thousands of lives are known to have been saved as a result.

Despite the large number of COVID-19 cases currently in our Region, high population immunity, largely brought about by successful vaccination programmes, has helped to keep hospitalization and death

rates down.

Getting fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and taking a booster dose when recommended is vitally important, particularly for people who are older, have underlying health conditions or are immunocompromised, because the virus is still circulating at high levels and lives are still being lost unnecessarily.

WHO continues to work with countries to help increase vaccine uptake, particularly among groups at high risk of severe disease.

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