

Cancer...My Story

Gary, 35, was diagnosed with bowel cancer two years ago. Here he talks about his symptoms, diagnosis, treatment and full recovery back to work.

My diagnosis

"When the doctor told me I had bowel cancer I remember thinking: 'this can't be happening to me.' I was in my late thirties and hadn't even felt that ill. I'd had some vague pains in my stomach and had started losing weight without trying to - which I put down to stress at first - but then I noticed some bleeding when I went to the loo and decided I had better go to the doctor.

Being told you have cancer changes your whole attitude to just about everything.

All those little worries; paying for the holiday, the leak in the kitchen roof, none of that mattered. I just wanted to be well again.

I felt shock and also anger and kept asking, why was this happening to me?"

Treatment

"After the diagnosis I barely had time to think because suddenly my days were full of appointments.

Within a fortnight I had surgery to remove the tumour growing in my bowel. I was lucky that it was early stage and had been caught before it had spread elsewhere. If I had put off going to the doctor it could have been far worse.

The surgery went well but I still had to have six months of chemotherapy to get rid of any cancer cells that may have been left. It might save your life but the truth is chemo is no fun. My short term memory was not good and my mouth became full of ulcers, not to mention the constant episodes of vomiting and headaches. The hair loss also took a bit of getting used to, I tried not to let on to family and friends that it was bothering me so tended to cover it up with humour which helped.

At the end of it all I was given the all clear. That was it, I had to go back into my normal life and hope that the cancer did not come back."

What I did after treatment

"During chemo I had a routine. When my treatment finished I was on my own again. It was quite a strange feeling and for the first few weeks I was a bit down.

With the support of my family I realised I had this opportunity to change my life and to have one more go at it. Cancer was a big wake up call for me and I didn't want it coming back so I



decided to make some changes:

- **Getting active:** *"Tiredness was one of my biggest problems even after the treatment. My doctor said that being active would help regulate my energy levels as well as my mood and stress levels. I started by going for a little walk and at first I felt exhausted but I found the more often I went out the easier it became. I then bought a bike and started cycling twice a week which I love. I used to think I couldn't do exercise and it was for fitness freaks but I've found ways to build it into my daily routine and I'm really enjoying it."*
- **Healthy eating:** *"Chemotherapy changed my tastes; things I used to love didn't taste the same. I found it really difficult to eat and wasn't enjoying my food, I made the decision to try new things and it was like being a child again, exploring new foods and discovering what I liked and disliked. A meal for me used to be based around meat; I loved my sausages and burgers and would often have these for lunch. I now try to get as much variety as possible within my diet, if I eat the same thing every day I get bored. I'm still finding foods I've never tried and it's quite enjoyable, my diet is definitely more colourful than it used to be!"*
- **Drinking less:** *"I have also cut back on boozing, I still like to socialise with the boys at the weekend but I can't push the pace like I used to and luckily they understand that and don't put any pressure on me to keep up. Sometimes I'll just have a soft drink every other round so I don't feel like I'm missing out completely."*

Where I am now

"I went back to work part time after my treatment as I was still suffering from fatigue after the chemotherapy. My managers were supportive with this and were flexible with my working hours so I could work around my energy levels.

I now have my check-ups every 6 months and each time I get a bit nervous and worry that it's going to come back. But I think that's pretty normal, you never forget that you had cancer and the process you had to go through to come out the other side.

I stay as healthy as I can and try to stay positive. Sometimes I get a bit nervous or feel a bit down when I think about it too much. I have learnt to be more open with my family and talk about what's bothering me, before I was a typical bloke who didn't talk about my feelings much. Having cancer has changed me but in some ways I think I've changed for the better."

