

Surviving breast cancer, what no-one tells you

My name is Claire, I'm 60 years old and I'm a breast cancer survivor. Ten years ago my life was turned upside down when I was told I had cancer in my right breast. I had felt a lump one morning in the shower. I told my GP and they sent me off for a Mammogram. I can still see the consultant in my mind's eye and hear the words "it's cancer" delivered in a small room in the Ladybird Unit at Poole Hospital. Then the rollercoaster ride began. First surgery, because of the stage they recommended a mastectomy, then radiotherapy. I was spared chemo but took other medicines to block what estrogen my body produced as apparently my breast cancer was estrogen positive.

Once the scars from the surgery had healed I entered the survivor or remission zone. Yes my cancer had been removed but I was now facing the psychological consequences of the changes to my body, my body image, my sexuality and horrific hot flushes and night sweats. The later arising from having been plunged into the menopause, by those estrogen blockers tamoxifen and letrozole!

I chose reconstructive surgery. I did my research and found a plastic surgeon specializing in a type of flap reconstruction. The results were amazing.

Next I started fluoxetine for the hot flushes They helped a bit but not much. I discovered I couldn't drink wine anymore, it triggered them. I tried



red, white, rose and champagne sometimes I could get away with a Bombay Sapphire G&T.

What NO ONE told me about or to expect was what happened below my waist to my vagina and bladder. I started to develop dryness and soreness. Then this urge to go to the toilet for a pee constantly. Everytime I played golf I had to go before I teed off, whenever the ladies in front where on a go slow and before I joined them all in the clubhouse afterwards. Sex. Well my

vagina just seemed to dry up. Yes I had had a caesarean section, so I had never experienced the loss of sensation after a vaginal birth that some girl friends had shared, but now I couldn't bear sex. The pain was terrible, a burning, tearing pain. I tensed up. I tried for the sake of my husband, but then we had to stop. That was 8 years ago. I tried all sorts of creams and lotions. Multiple antibiotics too for what the GP thought was a UTI. Nothing worked. I even tried estrogen cream even though my breast cancer was estrogen positive. Eventually I was

told I had vaginal atrophy. It's basically where in the absence of estrogen my vagina and bladder opening had shrivelled up. Great. Then a friend mentioned the Mona Lisa Touch. It's laser treatment for vaginal

atrophy. I was really sceptical at first but I did my research again and found it was available in Poole at Clarendon Health, with the Gynaecologist Mr Alex Taylor. After the first treatment the urge to go for a pee started to get better. By the time I went for my third (it's a course of three, each a month apart), I was really seeing the benefits.

My experience was transformational. I can now have sex again and get round the golf course without needing disappear to the toilet! I still use an estrogen cream once a week and the lubricant. I was asked if I would write up my story to share with other breast cancer survivors. Whilst I wasn't comfortable going on camera I did want to give hope to others.

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