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WHEN serious illness STRIKES under 30

Think a brain tumor could never happen to you? Or that menopause is years away? So did these four women, all with illnesses meant for women twice their age

■ BY ANDREA MARIE THOMPSON

The grid contains four panels, each with a woman's portrait and text:

- Top Left:** "blood clot AT AGE 24" with a red-tinted background of a person's head and neck.
- Top Right:** "brain tumor AT AGE 19" with a blue-tinted background of a brain scan.
- Bottom Left:** "esophagus removed AT AGE 19" with a blue-tinted background of a person's head and neck.
- Bottom Right:** "menopause AT AGE 27" with a yellow-tinted background of a person's head and neck.

Serious illness is never something we plan for, and its impact is that much more disturbing when disease strikes young. Here's how four women dealt with the shock of an out-of-the-blue health crisis that usually shows up at a much older age

"I went through menopause at the same time as my 52-year-old mother."

—Stacy, 28, child psychologist, Portage, MI

endometriosis

AGE
AFFLICTED
13



stacy I had been suffering from endometriosis, when tissue from the uterine lining forms abnormally outside the uterus, since I was 13. It left me with scars and cysts on my ovaries, and it caused incredible pain in my abdomen that I felt every day—it was as if someone was standing on my stomach, kicking me.

By 27, the pain had become so severe that I had to stop dancing (something I love). Even sex hurt. I'd tried serious painkillers, like codeine, morphine, Vicodin, and Darvocet, but nothing helped.

A friend suggested I see a reproductive endocrinologist. He put me on Depo Lupron, a hormonal injection that lowers estrogen levels in the body and

causes endometriosis to "shrink." But the estrogen dip that occurs can trigger menopausal symptoms instantly—and that's what happened to me right after my first injection.

me, out of control

Now I had less pain, but I was hot and cold and felt sweaty all the time. I couldn't control my moods—I would yell at anyone, anytime. My out-of-whack emotions started to affect my professional relationships, so I took a medical leave from my job.

After nine months of Depo Lupron shots (six months is the normal course of therapy), the pain started up again, which wasn't supposed to happen. It meant the drug hadn't worked. So, because of my severe case, I saw no other option than to get a full hysterectomy at 28 to finally end my suffering for good. But that also meant I would never

"I WAS HOT AND COLD AND FELT SWEATY ALL THE TIME. I COULDN'T CONTROL MY MOODS—I YELLED AT ANYONE, ANYTIME."
—STACY

be able to become pregnant. Because I want to have children of my own one day, I froze my eggs before the operation and will have to use a surrogate to carry the embryo.

Today, about four months after the hysterectomy, I feel great. Pain no longer consumes my life. I can be as active as I want, and I'm ready to date again. I do feel twinges of sadness when I think about never experiencing pregnancy, but I try to focus on the positives in my world.

the facts

■ endometriosis warning signs

Pain during ovulation, menstruation, and during and after sex; heavy periods; bleeding between periods; infertility.

■ **how it's diagnosed** Pelvic exam by a physician or via ultrasound, followed by laparoscopy (in which a tiny telescope allows doctors to look internally for excess tissue).

■ **treatment** Medication (and other therapies) to ease pain or retard tissue growth; or, for severe cases, surgery.

■ **how to reduce your risk** Since causes are unknown, there's no way to reduce risk. Endometriosis can run in families, and if caught early, treatment may slow its progress.

■ **for more info** Log on to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine website at www.asrm.org, or the Endometriosis Association website at www.endometriosisassn.org. ▷

“Most of my esophagus had to be removed.”

—Maureen, 32, grad student, New York City

achalasia

AGE
AFFLICTED
15



maureen My problem began when I was in high school. It came on so gradually that it took me a while to realize something was wrong. I was having trouble swallowing. Food just wouldn't go down, and so I started losing weight rapidly. My mother, a dietician, thought I was bulimic or anorexic, until I explained what was going on.

Although I didn't know it at the time, I was going through the onset of achalasia, a disease that affects the muscles of the esophagus—the ones that move food downward into the stomach after you swallow. Achalasia also affects the lower esophageal sphincter—the muscle that allows what you eat and drink to enter the stomach. In some cases of achalasia, the muscles stop functioning and the sphincter remains rigid—so when you try to swallow, food and liquid backs up like a dam. It's a disease that usually doesn't occur until between ages 30 and 50. But it happened to me.

my incredible shrinking food pipe

By the time I was 19, I had undergone numerous surgeries and other medical procedures to ease the problem. But

nothing had worked. Finally, after going to the hospital to have an endoscopic procedure, it was determined that my esophagus had simply weakened too

much, and that all but a few inches of it would have to be removed. During the operation, my stomach was hoisted to chest-level and attached to my now-super-short esophagus. A small scar on the front of my neck marks the spot where my stomach now sits.

The good news is, I can now eat almost anything, except hard-to-digest vegetables and red meats. Life is good. I'm in graduate school, and I'm engaged to a great guy. I used to be resentful that this happened to me; now, I'm just glad I have been able to make the best out of a challenging situation.

the facts

■ achalasia warning signs

Difficulty swallowing food or liquids; having the feeling in your throat that you're going to vomit without actually doing so; coughing so hard during sleep that you wake up.

■ **how it's diagnosed** X rays or an endoscopic video exam of the esophagus.

■ **treatment** Balloon dilation or medications to loosen muscular tension of the sphincter. Botox injections are being used to paralyze the sphincter muscle, thus lowering its

food to enter the stomach.

■ how to reduce your risk

The cause of achalasia is unknown, so unfortunately, there is no way to reduce risk.

■ **for more info** Log on to the National Institutes of Health's website at www.nih.gov.

“A blood clot almost killed me.”

—Rhonda, 25, social worker, Queens, NY

deep-vein thrombosis

AGE
AFFLICTED
24



rhonda Last year, I was working on an art project and often sat for six-hour stretches in a cross-legged position on my floor. I worked for three days this way—I didn't even notice the time passing. But on the third day, I started feeling a pinch in my lower abdomen. Over the next 10 days, the pain increased to the point where I had difficulty walking, and eventually, I couldn't even stand up straight.

My doctor gave me a prescription painkiller and sent me to the hospital for a CAT scan. Immediately afterward, I headed home. As soon as I walked in my front door, the phone rang; it was a doctor from the hospital calling to tell me that a blood clot had showed up on my scan, and that I needed to get to the emergency room as soon as possible. My mind and heart ▷

“MY MOM THOUGHT I WAS BULIMIC—UNTIL I EXPLAINED WHAT WAS REALLY GOING ON.”
—MAUREEN

were racing. Apparently—all these details came out later—the size and location of the blood clot could have killed me at any moment if it had dislodged and traveled to my lungs. I called a friend to meet me at the hospital, packed a bag, and rushed to the ER.

I spent four days in the hospital, where I was put on blood thinners to begin dissolving the clot. After I was released, I had to keep taking the drugs for three months, until the clot totally disappeared.

my genetic surprise

Deep-vein thrombosis (DVT), a disorder in which blood clots form in the leg and pelvic veins, is uncommon in people under 60. But my blood work from the hospital showed that I have inherited a coagulation disorder I'd never known about, which makes me more prone to DVT. Sitting for those long periods during my three-day project may have aggravated the situation; doing that causes circulation to slow, which is ideal for clot formation.

It's possible that I could develop another DVT, so I don't take birth-control pills anymore (the Pill may put people with clotting disorders more at risk), and I stay active to keep my circulation moving. I'm not overly nervous, but I do make a point to live every day to the fullest. I know now that it can all be taken away at any time, at any age. I'm relieved and thankful that I'm OK.

the facts

■ **DVT warning signs** Pain, swelling, and a blue discoloration in the leg. (Severity of these signs varies.)

■ **how it's diagnosed** Doctors inspect veins with ultrasound or scanning devices, like an MRI, and by using a special injectable dye that allows them to see any blockages.

■ **treatment** Blood-thinners are commonly used. For advanced cases, a tiny filter can be inserted into a vein to trap potential clots before they travel to the lungs or heart.

■ **how to reduce your risk** Maintain a healthy weight (obesity puts you at risk for DVT). Make a point to stand up and move around periodically during long stints of sitting. Exercise the legs to improve blood flow.

■ **for more info** Log on to the American Heart Association website at www.americanheart.com.

revealed a baseball-size tumor pressing on my brain. It was in a life-threatening position and had to be removed right away—or else. I had surgery two days later. It was a blur, but it was actually good that it happened so quickly: If I'd had more time to think about what was happening to me, I'm sure I would have had a nervous breakdown.

family matters

I was in the hospital for a total of nine days. My head had to be shaved, and I lost 15 pounds. My family never left my side for the entire time, and they were there for me during the weeks of recovery.

Two months after my surgery, I was back at work part-time. My headaches are gone. I'm not completely in the clear, though—there's a 30-percent chance of the tumor recurring. But I'm not that worried about it. With my family by my side, I know I can get through anything.

“They found a baseball-size tumor in my brain.”

—Jenelle, 20, nursing assistant, Fort Loramie, OH

benign brain tumor



“THE TUMOR HAD TO BE REMOVED RIGHT AWAY—OR ELSE.”
—JENELLE

jenelle I had been having headaches for about a year and didn't know why. One night, while driving my car, I got one so bad that I blacked out. When I woke up a half-hour later, my car was in a field. My entire body began shaking and sweating, and then I vomited violently. I was terrified, but I somehow managed to drive home.

The next day, I saw my primary-care doctor. He sent me to a get a CAT scan, and based on that he had me go to a neurosurgeon, who then ordered an MRI. That test

the facts

■ **brain-tumor warning signs** Indicators may include a combination of signals including persistent headaches, vision problems, hearing loss, dizziness, and seizures, along with nausea or vomiting.

■ **how it's diagnosed** MRI scan using a contrast-injection to highlight the tumor size.

■ **treatment** In some cases, radiation and/or chemotherapy may help to shrink tumor size. Sometimes (if it doesn't put your life at risk), the tumor can be removed surgically.

■ **how to reduce your risk** There is no known way to reduce risk. In adults, brain tumors are more likely to strike those ages 40 through 70.

■ **for more info** Log on to the National Brain Tumor Foundation website at www.braintumor.org. □