

'How can this be happening?'



When Sarah's smear was delayed, it started a chain of devastating events...

speculum, I winced.

'Ouch,' I cried.

It was odd how painful it felt.

'I'm sure my last smear didn't hurt,' I thought. 'Maybe it's because it's been a while.'

'There is some blood,' the nurse said. 'You're not on your period or due to start, are you?'

'No,' I replied, confused.

Once she was done, I got dressed and she came back in.

'You may be called in for a colposcopy,' she explained.

It was a procedure that checked for abnormal cells in the cervix.

I just had to wait to hear.

Walking through the front door, Mum asked, 'How was it, love?'

'Bit painful,' I replied. 'But I should hear back soon.'

And when I didn't get a call from the doctors, I assumed all was OK.

Not long after, I flew to Spain for my first getaway since lockdown.

Sun, sea, and relaxation couldn't come soon enough!

When I came home a week later, I heaved my suitcase through the door.

Then I noticed two letters addressed to me and my stomach dropped.

Urgent, they both had

written across the front.

'Oh no,' I thought.

I opened the first one and braced myself.

'Your smear has detected abnormal cells,' it read.

That wasn't all.

I also had HPV - human papillomavirus - which could cause cell changes that might lead to cervical cancer.

The second letter revealed I'd been booked in for a colposcopy the following week, to examine my cervix closer.

I tried not to panic, but nerves crashed over me.

'What if it's more than HPV?' I fretted to my sister, Victoria. 'What if it's cancer?'

I thought back to how painful my smear was...

'I'll come with you for your colposcopy,' Victoria offered.

She worked as a nurse, so I was glad to have her with me.

The day of my appointment, I felt incredibly anxious.

That same sixth sense I'd felt

at my smear reappeared.

Lying down on the bed, the consultant clocked my worried face.

'If you're worried it will be painful, we can do a loop excision under general anaesthetic,' she said. 'It's a common procedure where we use a thin, heated wire loop to remove abnormal cells from the cervix.'

Immediately, I feared the worst.

'Does she already think it's cancer?' I wondered.

As she tried to insert the speculum, it was excruciating.

'Is that OK?' she asked.

'It hurts too much,' I cried.

She managed to get an image up on the screen,

but couldn't get as close as she needed.

Still, I could see something white on my cervix.

Victoria was looking at it too.

A nurse rebooked me for the loop excision under general anaesthetic.

Once we got outside the hospital, Victoria looked uneasy.

'What is it?' I panicked.

'I looked at the consultant's notes,' she said. 'She'd written suspected squamous cell carcinoma.'

It was a type of cancer.

Tears fell down my cheeks. We rang Mum and told her what we'd seen.

'It doesn't look good, Mum,' I wept.

Back home, she wrapped her



Ringing the bell at the hospital

arms around me.

Victoria and her did their best to comfort me, but all we could do was wait.

A week later, I had the loop excision where they took a sample from my cervix for analysis.

And soon, the consultant called me.

'We have your results,' she said. 'Can you come in tomorrow, and bring someone with you?'

My heart sank.

I knew that couldn't be good.

Mum and Victoria came with me the next day.

We were called through by the consultant, who had a Macmillan Cancer nurse sat by her side.

I already felt numb.

'We sent off your biopsy,' she began. 'I'm sorry, the results show you have cancer.'

Bursting into tears, I looked at Mum and Victoria's anguished faces.

She explained it was a rare form of cervical cancer, known as poorly-differentiated squamous cell carcinoma.

It was fast growing and aggressive.

Victoria had been right.

But then came the biggest blow. 'It's likely you'll need a hysterectomy,' she said.

'I've not had children yet!' I panicked.

'I want to be a mum.'

'There are alternatives to surgery,' she soothed. 'But it may be better for you to have a full hysterectomy.'

I was only 30.

How can this be happening to

me? I thought.

In the days that followed, I had a full-body MRI to make sure the cancer hadn't spread.

Thankfully, the results showed it hadn't.

That gave me some hope. But when I met with the

consultant, he put tissues on the table.

'You will need a hysterectomy,' he said softly.

I was devastated, and couldn't stop thinking how I'd never carry my own child.

Two months later, I had the operation to remove my womb.

I'd keep my ovaries, so I was still producing hormones.

I also had all my lymph nodes around my groin removed for testing too.

As I recovered from surgery, the results came back.

My lymph nodes were cancerous.

I'd been through so much, but my battle was far from over.

'Unfortunately that means you'll need chemotherapy and radiotherapy,' the consultant explained.

Deep down, I'd expected it. But while it wasn't a shock, it was still a lot to take in.

When my cancer treatment began, early menopause kicked in.

It was horrific to deal with. The brain fog, hot flushes, joint pain and fatigue overwhelmed me.

I was on HRT at just 31 years of age.

For seven weeks, I was in

and out of hospital.

I broke down to Mum.

'I just feel so horrendous,' I cried on her shoulder.

After four gruelling months, I got the news I'd been longing to hear.

'You're done with treatment!' the consultant said.

My hand jumped to my mouth.

'It's finally over?' I said in disbelief.

But as I rang the bell on the ward, it felt real.

'I'm so proud of you, love,' Mum beamed.

Every six months, I have a scan now. Thankfully, there's been no signs of cancer.

Still, three years on, I don't feel like myself yet. I get really tired and suffer from bowel problems.

But I try my best to enjoy life, and I'm surrounded by supportive friends and family.

I'm currently single, but if I want to have kids in the future, I have six eggs which were retrieved and frozen in between my hysterectomy and treatment.

It means I could potentially have my own baby, via IVF and using a surrogate.

After what I've gone through, I want to raise awareness for gynae issues.

On the anniversary of my smear, diagnosis, surgery and all-clear day, I always make sure to share my story on social media.

If I can help to ensure other girls don't miss their smears, I'll be happy.

It's so important to be vigilant - it could save your life.

Sarah Waters, 34, Prescot, Merseyside



Me now

'I should hear back soon'

Flicking through the post, I noticed a letter addressed to me. It was from my local hospital, asking me to come in for my smear. I realised it had been four years since my last one, due to lockdown restrictions putting smear tests on the back-burner. Knowing how important it was for me to get checked, I called my GP straightaway to book my appointment. A few weeks later, I went in for my smear.

Only when the nurse called me through, I suddenly had a weird feeling in my gut. It felt like bad news was on the horizon...

As the nurse inserted the



Treatment wiped me out