

'I fall asleep six times a day – people think I'm lazy'

Belle Breukelman finally discovered why she kept nodding off in public

Mum Belle Breukelman has fallen asleep in changing rooms and even nodded off on dates in restaurants. The 29-year-old suffers from the debilitating condition narcolepsy – which affects around 30,000 people in the UK – but she has been accused of being drunk or on drugs when she struggles to stay awake.

Belle, who is mum to 10-month-old Billie, naps up to six times a day, sometimes for 25 minutes a time. Without medication, she would fall asleep every time she sits down.

She explains, "My sleep attacks come on without warning. When out shopping, I've had to jump into a changing room and lie down to nap. I've fallen asleep on dates, I've had people assume I'm drunk and out of control. My doctor thought I was a drinker or smoked cannabis and when I was younger they blamed me for 'staying up too late on my phone'."

"As a mum of a young baby, it can be really hard. Sometimes, I will be feeding Billie her dinner and start to fall asleep."

"I can feel my eyes getting heavier and I start to feel cold, so I lie down, before I fall, and snooze. My daughter is used to this now and thankfully smiles when I wake."

"I manage to work around my condition and sometimes I put her to bed unbathed rather

than trying to bathe her in a sleepy state – it's too dangerous. I'd never put her at risk."

Belle, from Oxford, first started suffering from the condition at 15 when she struggled to stay awake on car journeys – by 16 she was frequently napping in the classroom at school.

"Falling asleep in front of people was awful. It would happen on school trips and every time I sat down in class. They would poke fun at me and say, 'Oh, she's going to sleep again!' It was so upsetting and embarrassing."

"My parents knew something wasn't right and took me to the doctor. It was becoming a problem and they were worried because I'd soon be learning to drive. Doctors dismissed it as the actions of an overtired teenager – saying I should come off my phone earlier at night."

"I never heard anyone mention narcolepsy – I didn't even know what it was. Then, one day, I went to an art exhibition with my school, and having been on my feet all day, I literally fell asleep standing up. My parents took me back to the doctor – we needed answers."

VITAL BREAKTHROUGH

Within a month, Belle was referred to a sleep specialist at Oxford Children's Hospital where she was diagnosed with severe narcolepsy. She was put on medication to try to control



how often she slept. After more tests, over five years, experts found her condition was the result of a swine flu jab she had when she was 15. It's since been discovered that around 100 children in the UK contracted narcolepsy from this vaccination.

Belle left school at 17. "It was just too much – the friends, the social side of things, and then the studying. Everything was so hard."

During a family skiing holiday in Austria when she was 19, Belle met her future husband, Maikel, now 34. The couple moved to Amsterdam when Belle was 21 and married when she was 22. She reveals he has always been surprisingly unfazed by her condition. "He has always told me to stop fighting it. If I need to nap, just nap. He has always been supportive. He tells me to stop overthinking it."

"I've been judged by friends, doctors and the public. I was out for dinner with my husband in Paris for my birthday in 2019, when I fell asleep at the table. He watched football on his phone until I was ready, but later admitted that people



'People assumed I was lazy'