

I'm one of the LUCKY ONES

Ali Stunt, 45, explains why, as a rare survivor of pancreatic cancer, she is campaigning to give others a better chance

Ali, who lives in Surrey with her husband Phil and their two teenage sons, has set up the charity Pancreatic Cancer Action (pancreaticcanceraction.org).

As far as I was aware, I was a fit and healthy mum of two. At 41, I exercised regularly, didn't smoke and drank in moderation. My symptoms started with an ache in the middle of my back – I couldn't get comfortable sitting up or lying down. The pain radiated round to the front, on the right of my

sternum. Initially, doctors thought it might be dyspepsia, irritable bowel or pancreatitis and, as it worsened, I was put on increasingly strong painkillers.

After a month of GP visits and trips to A&E, I was finally referred to a consultant surgeon who admitted me for tests that same night. An ultrasound revealed a tumour – called an adenocarcinoma – in the thin end or "tail" of my pancreas. A week later, they operated to remove 80 per cent of my pancreas and my spleen in a procedure called a distal pancreatectomy.

Thankfully, I recovered quickly and was back home within two weeks.

It was only afterwards that I discovered the vast majority of pancreatic cancer patients are diagnosed too late for surgery and have a poor prognosis. It made me realise how lucky I'd been to have private medical insurance through my husband's work – I saw a consultant surgeon within two days of being referred by a GP and was scanned immediately. On the NHS, it would have taken four weeks for an ultrasound appointment. If I'd had to wait

that long, the tumour might have been too advanced to operate.

I had six months of chemotherapy followed by six weeks of daily chemo-radiotherapy to maximise the chances of the cancer not returning. I was lucky not to lose my hair, but three weeks into the radiotherapy, I was so exhausted I started falling asleep at the dinner table. And as my abdomen was receiving most of the radiation, I developed a rather embarrassing side effect: loud, uncontrollable belching, which amused my sons no end!

Once the treatment was over, I felt a mixture of emotions. I was elated and relieved, but in a funny way I had felt comforted by the chemo because I was being proactive. Now I just had to wait, my life compartmentalised into the time periods between CT scans.

Three years on, the physical scars have healed and I live my life more or less as I did before.

I am diabetic now as a result of the surgery, and the end of my fingers go numb and white when I'm cold – a side effect from chemo called peripheral neuropathy. Chemo also brought

on an early menopause, but that's a small price to pay. I see my oncologist every four months and have a CT scan once a year – waiting for the results is still terrifying. But, overall, I feel very fortunate. I'm one of the three per cent who survive this disease.

Through raising awareness with GPs and the public, I want to help increase early diagnosis of pancreatic cancer so those statistics improve. My ultimate aim is to make sure more people have the same journey I had – to catch this disease in time and come out the other side.

Most patients with my type of cancer are diagnosed too late for surgery



NEED TO KNOW The facts about pancreatic cancer

- ✦ The pancreas is a six-inch gland lying behind the stomach. It produces digestive enzymes and hormones, including insulin, that help control blood sugar levels.
- ✦ There are different types of pancreatic cancer, but there are usually no symptoms in the early stages. Later common signs are painless jaundice (yellow skin and eyes, dark urine), significant weight loss and persistent abdominal pain.
- ✦ Because the pancreas is close to several large and important organs and blood vessels, surgery and treatment is complex and difficult.
- ✦ It affects men and women equally, with a third of all cases occurring in the under-65s.
- ✦ The causes are so far unknown, but risk factors include smoking, obesity, diabetes and hereditary conditions. **w&h**