

[WOMB WITH A VIEW]

Every week, a woman reflects on motherhood – whether she has children or not

‘I MISSED MY SMEAR TESTS. NOW I’M INFERTILE’

Embarrassment and fear saw *Claire Saunders*, 38, repeatedly put off having a smear test. It was a decision she’d come to bitterly regret when she was diagnosed with cervical cancer

YOU THINK YOU’RE invincible when you’re young. Even after witnessing the Jade Goody effect – the *Big Brother* star, 27, died 10 years ago this March from cervical cancer, prompting nearly 500,000 extra women to turn up for a smear test – I never thought the disease would strike me. That mixture of naivety, ignorance and nervousness meant I repeatedly ignored the letters asking me to attend for my smear test – sticking them in the kitchen drawer, with an intention to sort it out later. But if I had just made that appointment, my cancer could have been caught so much earlier. Instead, it ended up taking my fertility.

I was one of the million women a year in the UK who now don’t go for their smear. Attendance rates for cervical screenings are at a 21-year low, and new research by Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust has found that over half of young women say they feel scared and vulnerable about going for the test. I was exactly the same. You hear horror stories about it hurting so, whenever the letters came, I’d just ignore them. I did worry about not going but I put it off, reasoning I’d do it when I had more time. I never did.

The embarrassment factor was there for me, too. Even though I’d had strangers examining me intimately when I gave birth to my daughters, I still felt intimidated, which seems ridiculous now. I know now the nurse has seen it all before.

Two years ago, aged 36, I realised something wasn’t right. I’d been getting a pain in my lower abdomen, spotting when I wasn’t due my period, and pain and bleeding after sex. I knew it wasn’t normal.

My GP referred me to The Holly Private Hospital in Essex. I needed to be seen urgently, and within two weeks I was there for my first ever smear test. The woman who did it could tell how anxious I was and couldn’t have been kinder. I admitted I’d never had one before, and she completely put me at ease, taking everything really slowly and gently, and using the smallest speculum to start off with. It felt uncomfortable, but not painful, and I had another nurse holding my hand, chatting to me the whole time. I couldn’t understand what I’d been so frightened of.

They could see immediately that there were abrasions on my cervix. I was sent for another investigation and that’s when I got



Claire with daughter Imogen

the diagnosis. Cancer. Like everyone who hears that word, I was instantly scared. In a way, it was a relief to know what was wrong. But I couldn’t stop blaming myself for not going sooner. I felt stupid, and so devastated that I’d let it get to this point.


Having to tell my family was horrendous. Ellie, my eldest daughter, was 15 and going through her GCSEs, while my youngest, Imogen, was six – too little to really understand – so they were both very worried. I spent a lot of time putting on a brave face for them, but everything happened so quickly that there wasn’t really time for me to overthink it.

A couple of weeks later I had LLETZ treatment – a procedure to burn off the abnormal cells – which left me in a lot of pain. Then I was told it wasn’t going to be enough. The best way to ensure the cancer wouldn’t come back was a hysterectomy to remove my entire cervix and womb. Because of my age, doctors recommended keeping my ovaries, so I wouldn’t go into early menopause.

The decision was obviously a sensible one, but that didn’t make it easy. At 36, I was lucky to already have my two girls but I’d been planning to have another child. After the operation I found it so distressing being on a ward with women who had pregnancy complications, and when I got home to my family the reality really hit me that I would never be able to give Imogen a brother or sister closer to her own age. I’d always planned to have a third and, even today, when my friends have babies, I find it tough.

After six weeks, I was given the all-clear, which was an enormous relief. I’d been feeling so low, drained and emotional. I wanted to get back into my normal routine, and back to my job as a store manager as quickly as possible. But my body isn’t the

AS TOLD TO: SARAH GRAHAM; MAIN PICTURE (POSED BY MODEL); GETTY IMAGES



WHEN I GOT THE CANCER DIAGNOSIS I COULDN'T STOP BLAMING MYSELF

same as it was. I used to do long-distance running, for instance, and now can’t run very far. I have bladder problems too – a common side effect of hysterectomies.

Two years on, the most important thing for me now is to send a message to other women about how important this is. I talk to the young girls at work about the importance of going for their smear tests. Three thousand women a year in the UK are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and it’s the most common cancer among women 35 and under. There are lots of reasons why women don’t go for their smears and they’re all the same feelings I had.

There were so many things I never realised, though, for instance that speculums come in different sizes. It’s all about putting yourself in the right mindset and feeling that you’re in control.

If you’re worried, take a friend along with you and, most importantly, talk beforehand with the medical professional doing your smear. Telling them that you’re feeling anxious helps them to help you – and really can make a whole world of difference.

This week marks Cervical Cancer Prevention Week. For more information, visit jostrust.org.uk