

New fibroid drug spared me from having a hysterectomy

RELIEF
Treatment has transformed Sam's life

Checking the dates on the calendar, Sam Carter's heart sank. A friend had invited her out for a drink but the date clashed with something else – her period.

Sam had spent more than a decade arranging her life around her menstrual cycle after suffering heavy and painful periods caused by fibroids – benign growths inside her womb.

"It was a complete nightmare," says Sam, 44, a credit controller from Nottingham. "I used a box of tampons a day. It was so embarrassing – virtually every month I would 'flood' at work. If someone asked me out and I was going to be on my period, I'd make up an excuse."

Just when it seemed a hysterectomy was her only option, Sam was offered a new drug, Esmya, which has shrunk her fibroids and eased the dreadful pain.

"I call it a miracle drug because my life is transformed," she says. "Periods no longer rule it."

Uterine fibroids are non-cancerous tumours that grow in or around the womb, causing pelvic pain, heavy periods and discomfort during sex. Four in 10 women, mainly aged 30 to 50, have them and Sam's problems started when she hit her 30s.

"I know your body changes in your 30s and for a while I thought everyone's periods were like mine," she says. "I was always bloated and because I bled so much, I had severe anaemia, which made my hair thin."

When her periods became unmanageable, she went to see her GP. "She said it was down to hormones and changed my contraceptive pill but it made no difference," she says.

"Over 18 months I went back and forth to my doctor. Each time, they tried me on a different pill. I got so fed up of it."

It was also starting to strain her marriage.

"I didn't like addressing in front of my husband because I was bloated," she says.

After three years, Sam was at the end of her tether. She

says: "I broke down in front of the doctor and she agreed to make a referral to a gynaecologist."

A scan at Queen's Medical Centre in Nottingham revealed several fibroids in her womb.

"They suggested a hysterectomy and I was devastated," she says. "I'd never been maternal but as soon as he said that, I told him I couldn't go through with the operation. I still wanted the chance to have children."

Instead, the gynaecologist performed a myomectomy, removing the fibroids with keyhole surgery in a five-hour op. The largest measured 8cm.

Sam says: "I was so relieved when things started to improve. I didn't feel so bloated."

But the fibroids grew again and

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a year later her symptoms returned. Around that time Sam and her husband split up.

Then, in 2006, Sam was offered an endometrial ablation – removing the womb lining.

But she met sales manager Adrian Carter, 39, in 2007 and decided to postpone the procedure because it can increase the risk of miscarriage.

She says: "We wanted to start a family, but I didn't even know if I could get pregnant because I was 37 and had fibroids."

Two years later, she and Adrian tied the knot but she still wasn't pregnant. "I was approved for IVF so we started the same year," Sam says. "It felt like my last chance. Amazingly I became pregnant on my first cycle."

"The only problem was that the fibroids were growing with the baby because pregnancy hormones can stimulate the

growth. One was pressing on my stomach so I couldn't eat much because I felt full very quickly."

When her son Ellis was born in October 2009, the largest fibroid was 7cm. The following May Sam had a uterine artery embolisation, which blocks the blood flow to fibroids to reduce their size, but her heavy periods returned a year later. "I was worried a hysterectomy would be my only option," she says.

But in November 2012 her gynaecologist told her about Esmya, which reduces bleeding and shrinks fibroids without menopausal side effects.

She says: "I took a three-month course and it was amazing. My heavy periods stopped, I didn't feel bloated and my hair started to grow back. It was the best I'd felt in years. I felt human again."

As the drug has just been approved to be used a second time if needed, after a three-month gap Sam started a second course and, six months on, she is still pleased with the results.

She says: "My fibroids have shrunk significantly and I'm due to see my gynaecologist in August to see what he suggests next."

Sam's consultant, Martin Powell of Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, says: "Esmya blocks the progesterone receptors inside fibroids, causing a reduction in size by 20-30%."

"Unlike other drugs, Esmya causes some cells in the fibroid to die, so they won't grow back."

"The drug was originally licensed to prepare women for surgery. Esmya makes [fibroids] easier to remove and reduces risk of complications."

"But it can now be used for longer periods and for some women, it could even be an alternative to invasive surgery."

Sam says: "If you're having problems, don't ignore them, as the longer you leave fibroids the worse they may get."

"Make sure you know all the options, get a second opinion. I'm so glad I did and didn't go ahead with the hysterectomy. If I did, I wouldn't have had my son."

BY EMMA PIETRAS

For further information, visit fibroidsconnect.com, the British Fibroid Trust at britishfibroidtrust.org.uk or NHS Choices at nhs.uk



HAPPY Sam with son Ellis and Adrian