

Rhea's story

I was 34 when diagnosed with locally advanced cervical cancer in 2016. My symptoms started when I was 5 months pregnant and I was diagnosed when my little boy was only 12 weeks old.

I had been experiencing bleeding, and pain in my bowel, bladder and pelvis, but this was thought to be due to the pregnancy. However the symptoms continued after birth and at 8 weeks I was sent by my GP for investigations. After an examination, ultrasound, colposcopy, biopsies, an emergency admission for 5 days with a temperature over 41C and severe pain, and MRI and CT scans, I was finally diagnosed.

Six weeks after diagnosis I began treatment for cervical cancer, which included chemotherapy, radiotherapy and brachytherapy. The treatment was brutal and took its toll including: losing 1.5 stone in 2 weeks due to severe nausea and vomiting, nerve damage in feet and fingers, tinnitus and kidney problems (all due to chemotherapy), severe diarrhoea, pain in pelvis, vaginal stenosis and menopause (all due to radiotherapy), as well as 'scanxiety' (anxiety leading up to scans) and fear of the cancer coming back.

Even now, 2 years after treatment finished, I still experience many of these symptoms particularly:

- pain in my pelvic bones especially my hips and pubis
- pain in my vagina
- urgent and frequent need to pass urine - also pain in my bladder
- lower abdominal pain
- urgent and frequent need to move my bowels and I have diarrhoea alternating with constipation
- nausea, bloating and upper abdominal pain
- fatigue
- fear of cancer coming back.

I work as a pain management nurse specialist in an NHS trust, and I have written about how I am able to manage my pain <https://www.mission-remission.com/Tips-Pain-After-Cancer>.

Despite all this I am a busy Mum, working and studying and I have completed 5k and 10k runs and a marathon! I am determined to help raise awareness of cancer, its treatment and the consequences of this treatment, especially Pelvic Radiation Disease. I recently featured in a story to encourage more women to take up cervical screening <https://www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk/2019/03/ndht-nurse-shares-her-story-to-support-new-national-cervical-screening-campaign/>. If we can prevent cervical cancer before it happens, we will prevent many women from getting Pelvic Radiation Disease. Please go for your smear test when you get your reminder!

I speak regularly about Pelvic Radiation Disease to other professionals where I work, such as our gynae-oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist, stoma nurses, gastroenterology doctors, ward nurses and students. I'm really keen to support PRDA to raise more awareness of PRD, so I also distribute leaflets whenever I can.

For more updates, please see my blog www.rheacrighton.wordpress.com, my Facebook page and connect with me on Twitter (@RheaCrighton1).