

Health S.O.S.

True health drama

Gutted

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One minute, I was sitting in the car on my way to work. The next, I heard my boyfriend, David Burton, whispering in my ear: 'Wake up, we're here.'

'Did I nod off again?' I yawned, as we pulled up at Stantonbury Campus, the secondary school where we both worked as teachers.

Over the past three years, it was normal for me to drift off during the 45-minute journey. I'd put it down to being anaemic. I took iron tablets, but I still felt constantly exhausted.

I tried not to let it get me down, though, or stop me doing things.

So, even though the school day was always hectic, I'd arranged to meet friends for a drink that night.

Big mistake.

As I sipped my beer in the pub, I felt dreadful. All I wanted to do was go home and sleep.

'I'm worried about you,' David, 28, said, when I staggered in.

'I'll get a chance to relax in the summer holidays,' I said.

It was June 2007, and we'd soon be breaking up.

But a month on, I felt just as bad.

What was wrong with

me? Was it all in my head?

I went to my GP, who did a blood test.

'You're still anaemic,' he said, when the tests came through. 'This time, you're lacking vitamin B12.'

Over the next two weeks, I had to have a painful B12 jab every other day. I felt a bit more energetic, but my blood tests showed there was still something wrong with me.

'I don't know what it is,' the doctor admitted. 'I'm going to refer you to a specialist.'

So, in September, I had more blood tests at Bedford Hospital.

I was fed up with feeling shattered and being poked and prodded. *Couldn't they just give me some vitamins and leave me alone?*

But when the doctor gave me the results this time, they told a different story...

'You've tested positive for coeliac disease,' he announced.

Tears sprung to my eyes.

There really was something wrong with me?

I'd heard of coeliac disease, but I didn't have a clue what it was.

'I want to do a biopsy to confirm the diagnosis,' he said.

Back home, I phoned my mum, Margaret, now 63.

'Why me?' I cried. 'I just want to be normal.'

'You'll be fine, love,' she insisted. 'We'll sort this out.'

FACT FILE

- **COELIAC DISEASE** is a condition that makes your body attack the small intestine when you eat gluten, which is a protein found in foods like wheat, rye and barley. About one in 100 people has coeliac disease.
- **SYMPTOMS** include bloating, diarrhoea, stomach pain, weight loss and anaemia.
- **HOW IS IT TREATED?** By the removal of gluten from your diet.

The next day, Mum turned up with a book on coeliac disease.

It turned out it was a disease that made my body attack my small intestine when I ate gluten, which is in foods like rye, wheat and barley.

It explained why my body wasn't absorbing the vitamins from my food properly.

Coeliac could cause severe bloating and stomach aches, too. I'd noticed that I got very bloated after bread and pasta, but I never had pain.

On 17 March 2008, I went back to Bedford Hospital, where I had a tube put down my throat and a biopsy of my small intestine.

'The lining of your small intestine is damaged, which is a typical sign of the disease,' the doctor said afterwards.

'But aren't people with coeliac supposed to get stomach aches?' I asked.

'No, not always,' he replied.

Sometimes, coeliac runs in families but, in my case, it was just bad luck. The good news was, I didn't need any serious drugs or treatments. All I had to do was change my diet.

So I went to see the hospital dietician.



Healthy living
Now, I'm gluten-free
and feeling great

I'm afraid even a little bit of gluten can cause a reaction,' she explained, giving me lists of things I could and couldn't eat any more.

My heart sank. This was going to be tougher than I'd expected. I couldn't have cakes or biscuits, even the Chinese takeaways I loved had gluten in them.

No, I told myself sternly. *Don't let it get you down. You have to do this.*

So I started cooking more instead of eating takeaways, fast food and ready meals.

David even gave up bread to support me.

Four months on, I can hardly believe the difference. My life has changed in so many ways.

I don't nod off in the car any more, and I can enjoy nights out with my mates.

I don't drink beer, though, because it has gluten in it. But it's a small price to pay for the healthy life I'm now living.

These days, I'm full of life and ready for anything, and there's no turning back.

'I had to give up my takeaways'



Testing times
I was sick of being poked and prodded at Bedford Hospital



What a man!
David even gave up bread for me