

## **Patient Story – Laura Abbass**

I was diagnosed aged 20 with lymphoblastic lymphoma of the mediastinum. Basically, that's cancer. A word you never thought you would hear when starting to take control of your life in work, school or university; if at all.

I was at university and living away from home, when I first noticed that I was constantly feeling under the weather and suffering with symptoms that my GP put down to stress of university. I ignored a lot of the symptoms myself. I was tired constantly, falling asleep at every opportunity, suffered with heart palpitations and reoccurring chest infections. One weekend I felt so unwell, I went to see an out of hours doctor who told me I may be developing mumps; a condition a lot of university students were coming down with, but there was nothing he could do, as he thought it was just a lingering viral infection. I had intense chest pains which lead my GP to send me for a few test and to see a cardiologist. He said some fluid surrounding my heart was the problem. Probably due to the chest infections. I was to expect things to get worse before better, and I was relieved when a name was finally given to everything. Things however got drastically worse within that week, and was rushed to hospital. I knew things were bad when I was taken straight to intensive care and doctors were seeming more panicked and lots more tests were carried out. Everything seemed to be frantic. I was initially treated with suspected pneumonia. My breathing was very difficult and so I was asked if they could ventilate me. The whole idea seemed a bit too serious and out of control, and I said no. From this point on, my world was blurry, fast and ultimately scary. Even to this day, it was if it wasn't really happening to me.

A few days later I was transferred to another hospital where I was told on arrival I had a tumour in my chest. All I remember is watching my dads reaction- I was still confused and couldn't say much because of my chest pains and the oxygen I needed, which seemed to be constantly attached to me. Even to cry was so much work and painful. Straight after this I was taken for a biopsy under ct which was when things started to sink in. But there was just no time to relax and think. Physically things had to be done and all of a sudden my body was not my own anymore.

Two lots of surgery later I started 2 years of chemotherapy. Because of the lateness and stage of my diagnosis, my parents told

my friends what was going on, and they were fantastic. A lot of friends and family came up to the hospital, and sent me things to cheer me up. Unfortunately, some of my friends couldn't take the pace and either denied what was going on or removed themselves away from me. At the time it was upsetting, and confusing but in time, you come to realise its not important and to focus on getting better and getting to be with the friends who have given their time and support. Whether it be making the journey to the hospital to sit with you or sending a funny text to make you smile.

Chemotherapy had its ups and downs. I started to feel better in so many ways . Some were painful and some made me sick. All while trying to get to grips with a changing body image. The hair loss didn't bother me as much as the way steroids changed the way I looked and the scarring from surgery. Something which I am still grappling with. I felt bad for my family who were juggling so much and their lives now constantly revolved around me. I was back at home, being looked after, and on "good days" friends would come and see me or take me out. On the "good" feeling occasions I went into denial and carried on going out like I had done before when I shouldn't have and subsequently put my health at risk. There were numerous occasions when we went to the ward in the middle of the night with a raised temperature, and some of those times must have been due to my recklessness and quest for proving something. It really wasn't worth it! After one Christmas, I was on the day unit about to go home after a day of chemo when it was spotted I was a little warm. Half an hour later I was in HDU with pneumonia and a collapsed lung. Very scary and an event which put my confidence back even further. Very much a low period, and questioning, was it all really worth it?

I felt like I had gone back to square one when I had a reaction to a drug which caused a clot on my brain. I had several seizures, and suffered stroke like after effects. In an instant I felt like my dignity and strength was taken away again, and I was so angry and scared of doing anything. Being fed, cleaned and washed, by strangers and my super mum was not a confidence building block in my young adult learning curve. This blob called cancer isn't physical. I couldn't sit down and have a fiery chat with this "cancer" and all that went with it. I was fed up of being constantly scared and could feel my confidence slipping. You just have to take each little chunk and work through it.

Mentally the things you go through are the hardest. The pain of treatment or infections can sometimes really lower your spirits but you have to push on. What I found, was that the chemo went in definite peaks and troughs which meant you were emotionally in constant battle with yourself.

Getting your life back on track is very hard, and it has seemed that friends have passed me by and left me behind. I have started afresh, and worked hard at figuring out who this new person is. Tiredness is a huge problem during and after treatment and its hard trying to explain it to some people.

I am now 7 months post treatment. It was all very much worth it. I have re started university, increasing my social life and thoroughly enjoying myself. I have come to learn that cancer is not something I will get over, but something I will live with. For some reason I thought I could put it in a neat box and forget about it. But actually when it has been a part of your life for so long you should be, a) proud of what you have accomplished and b) take all what you have learned and have fun!

1. Talk to your friends often about what's going on or how your feeling. Maybe just one friend who can inform others, or send out an email
2. Don't read too much into your condition on the internet etc, as everyone is different. Any questions, just ask your nurses or doctors.
3. Take advantage of what the hospital or charities have to offer you. Events and get togethers. Even when you feeling very anti-social and just want to hide away, getting together and meeting others can really help, and make you feel better and less on your own
4. Ask lots of questions- having the knowledge makes things less scary. Even if you can't read it or absorb it all at once, you can have it there to come back to.
5. Watch lots of comedy!!!
6. Always be positive. You can't always feel or be like it but there are many good things to get out of the whole journey