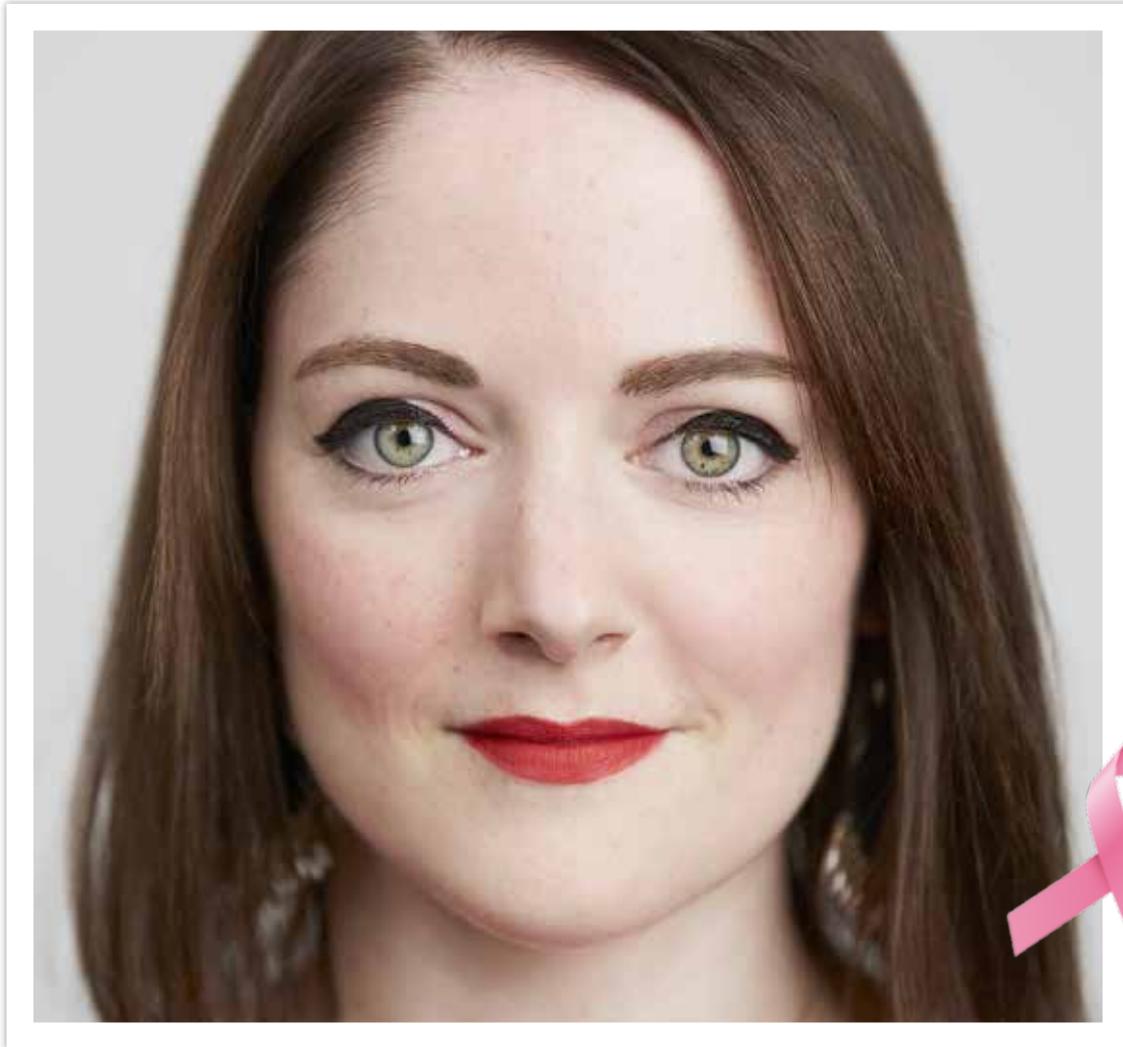


“CHEMO AT 30 IS NOT IN ANYONE’S PLAN”



Diagnosed with breast cancer at 29, Laura Price faced the prospect of her mortality – and infertility – with determination

“

'Mummy, why does that lady have pink hair?' I heard a little girl ask her mum next to me in the salon. I glanced at myself in the mirror. I wish I could have said it was a daring move, bold experimentation – but that would be far from true. It was one of those cheap fancy dress wigs that itches and smells of plastic. I was about to take it off, ready to let the hairdresser shave off the tufts of hair left on my head. I was going full-on bald – the surest way to tell the world I was a cancer patient.

I was never one of those who thought breast cancer wouldn't happen to me. My grandmother died of it in her 40s. When I found the lump in my breast while on holiday, cancer was the first

thing that came into my head. I was 29. Nothing bad had happened to me so far; surely it was time for some tragedy?

Thanks to my company's private medical insurance, I went straight for the vital tests – a mammogram and ultrasound, neither of which was any more uncomfortable than a blood test or smear. I was in and out and back at my desk within an hour, returning later the same afternoon for the verdict.

'We're 99% sure it's a hormonal cyst – very common for a woman of your age,' said the doctor, a greying man in his 60s. He advised I return within three months if the lump hadn't gone away, but he didn't insist. I texted my mum about the good news and the lump itself – she'd have worried herself sick if I told her in advance.

A couple of months later, on the insistence

of my then-boyfriend and my mum, I went to see another GP. She agreed it was probably a cyst but made a hospital referral, to be safe. Six weeks later, the consultant echoed the doctors' opinions: nothing to be concerned about, but I would be referred for tests, just to be sure.

Another four weeks later, four months after I found the lump, I was told to stick around after my ultrasound for something called a core biopsy. I wasn't worried as I watched on a screen while the doctor poked around in my breast with the biggest needle I'd ever seen. I'm not sure how I'd have got through the next week waiting for my results if I had any inkling I was about to be diagnosed with cancer. Instead, I was so blasé I broke up with my boyfriend on the Monday, ran a 10k race on Wednesday and nipped out of work for my



→ appointment on Friday, telling my boss I'd be back that afternoon. But when the nurse said, 'Did you bring anyone with you today?' I knew what was about to happen.

When they sit you down to tell you that you have breast cancer in your 20s, they like to tell you everything at once: you have cancer, you're going to lose your hair and, if that's not enough, chemo might make you infertile. You're suddenly immersed in a world of acronyms: FEC-T (a type of chemotherapy), HER2 (an aggressive type of cancer) and BRCA (the cancer-causing gene fault that led Angelina Jolie to have a preventive double mastectomy).

'At least now you can get a new rack, right?' said a guy friend, the first person I saw out of work, the day after my diagnosis. I hadn't cancelled our brunch plans because I thought it was best to keep busy – and besides, there wasn't exactly much I could do over the weekend about the tumour lurking inside me.

Within a week, I moved back to my parents' house and tracked down one of the largest cancer treatment centres in Europe, Manchester's The Christie hospital. My dad made a joke about making sure they operated on the right breast (actually the left one) and in I went for my first general anaesthetic. Thankfully, I didn't need a mastectomy as the tumour was small, so I came away with just a small-ish scar, like a baby shark bite. With my own breasts and nipples intact, I might still be able to breastfeed one day.

But here's the thing. Cancer for pre-menopausal women isn't the same as for older women. Just as harrowing, of course, but with an added complication: safeguarding your future fertility. Chemotherapy is a miracle, but it's also a cocktail of chemicals that obliterates all in its path. In its quest to kill the cancer cells, it also destroys hair, nails and ovaries – all the things that make you feel like a woman.

I was given an option to freeze my eggs, with the caveat that stimulating my oestrogen for IVF could aggravate the tumour or cause a new one. Because breast cancer is so rare in women under the age of 35, and because my type of cancer was oestrogen-sensitive, there was virtually no research or information to tell me if the IVF



LAURA TRIED A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT COLOURED WIGS



WHILE UNDERGOING CHEMOTHERAPY



THE PHOTO SHE USED ON A DATING WEBSITE

process was safe. To add insult to injury, I was told I'd have more chance of a successful pregnancy if I could freeze an embryo rather than just an egg. I was single. It was the hardest decision of my life.

It was my dad who helped make up my mind. He said he'd rather see his little girl get better than have me gamble on the future of a hypothetical baby who may grow up without a mother. I went ahead with chemo without a fertility insurance plan, leaving my future to fate. I've never regretted that decision.

Three days after my 30th birthday and my best friend's wedding, I cut my hair into a pixie crop, ready for chemo. As friends were busy getting married and enjoying summer holidays, I was steeling myself for the unknown.

Chemo was as bad as they say. The hair loss, the bloating, the headaches like the worst migraine and hangover combined. But what the movies never mention is the crippling constipation (I once nearly fainted on my bathroom floor after an hour on the loo), losing your sense of taste

(miso soup tastes like metal) and the periods of depression (try flicking through Insta in wedding season when you're in bed unable to move).

I learned to inject myself in the stomach with a daily immunity-boosting medicine; at one point I ended up on a drip in hospital, in quarantine because my white blood-cell count was so low that a cold could prove fatal. By the end of five months of treatment, my eyebrows and lashes had fallen out, making me look sicker than ever.

With chemo ending just before the New Year, it felt like time for a fresh start. During treatment, there were times when I could barely stand long enough to brush my teeth, so being able to run a mile by the end of January was a triumph. I still

had to go through six weeks of radiotherapy, but on the day of my final radiotherapy session, a year after I found the lump, in February 2013 I joined a dating site. I didn't want to date guys who would be put off by my status as recovering cancer patient, so I went the whole hog with a bald profile pic and full disclosure about my dodgy boob and possible infertility.

It turned out to be the biggest confidence-booster. Guys weren't so much put off as turned on by the bald head, and my profile attracted sensitive, caring and respectful men. I met a great guy who was happy to be seen with the bald girl and, though it only

lasted a year, I knew he loved me for who I was.

Five years later, at 35, I lead a pretty normal life with a busy work schedule and lots of exercise. I still have mood swings and hot flushes from hormone treatment I'll be taking for the next five years, and the smell of milky coffee takes me back to the chemo ward. But I'm lucky. I'm in remission, but I constantly check for changes as cancer can always come back. And it has, for too many of the people I've met along the way.

Earlier this year I lost a friend, another Laura, to breast cancer. She was one of the most vibrant, positive people I've ever met and she clung to every moment of joy in life, even after all hope of a future was taken away. Her family and friends now have a saying: 'What would Laura do?' The answer is she'd seize every day and dance all night, covered head to toe in glitter. When I feel sorry for myself, I try to remember that." S

APPS TO AID EARLY DETECTION

Evelyn Lauder launched the pink ribbon campaign 25 years ago. The lapel pin, designed to remind women to check their breasts regularly, led to the designation of October as Breast Cancer Awareness Month and £200million-plus raised for The Breast Cancer Research Foundation. These apps are helping safeguard her legacy...



COPPAFEELI'S TEXT REMINDER SERVICE
CoppaFeel's

Kristin Hallenga was diagnosed with incurable breast cancer at 23, so she set out to educate young women on early detection. Sign up for SMS alerts or apply for a shower sticker reminder. coppafeel.org



BREAST CHECK NOW
Breast Cancer Now's app

encourages you to check your breasts by sending a reminder just before you're about to do a regular activity, such as taking a shower or going for a run. There's also a helpful guide on how to check and what to look for. breastcancer.org



YOUR MAN REMINDER
Rethink Breast Cancer's Your Man

Reminder app sends a series of videos of hot guys with washboard abs to your phone to remind you to check your breasts and to show you how to do it. We'll glide over the hint of objectification – it's for a good cause. rethinkbreastcancer.com