

Faith Smith's voice trailed away. While chatting about her hysterectomy, her friend had gone as white as a sheet. "You can't be operated on by him," Brenda finally stammered.

"I had surgery with him a few years ago and I almost died," she explained. "It was awful. If he's your surgeon, you'll never be well again."

Her words shook Faith to the core. At her next appointment with her GP she insisted she didn't want to be operated on by this particular gynaecologist.

His name? Rodney Ledward.

It was another 10 years before his appalling record came to light...

Nicknamed 'The Butcher', Ledward was struck off and found guilty of serious professional misconduct after leaving a trail of botched operations behind him during his long career.

His incompetence included damaging patients' bladders and removing healthy wombs.

Many patients came close to death while, it's claimed, several women eventually died as a consequence of the surgery.

"I could so easily have been one of them," says Faith, a cashier from Hythe, Kent. "And I can never thank Brenda enough for warning me off."

Although surprised at her insistence, Faith's GP agreed to refer her to another surgeon at the same hospital. Her subsequent hysterectomy was a complete success and she now counts herself one of the luckiest women alive.

Of course, not all of us have the benefit of a friend with inside knowledge of a particular doctor or hospital.

Yet power is being given to the patient on an unprecedented scale. We're being actively encouraged to stand up for our rights, seek second opinions and demand better healthcare.

In fact, the new National Plan for the NHS is providing £2 billion extra funding along with a commitment to involve patients more in their own care.

"Well-informed patients will help to produce a better NHS," says Health Minister John Denham. "Patients shouldn't feel afraid to ask questions to equip themselves with information."

But it's one thing saying: 'Ask questions, demand this, arm yourself with facts.' In practice, it's quite another.

Seeking medical help is already nerve-racking enough, without worrying about the standard of care you'll be receiving. You may feel intimidated by a

brusque GP or consultant who's rushed for time; while questioning a diagnosis or asking for a second opinion can seem the most difficult thing in the world when faced with a larger-than-life figure who bamboozles you with medical jargon.

It's even harder when you don't know

We can feel anxious and confused when it comes to seeking medical help. But, armed with the right information, the NHS needn't be a lottery...

what your rights actually are. Could your GP strike you off for being a nuisance? Can you blatantly ask a doctor if his esteemed colleague is a brute in the operating theatre?

Which is why we've put together this extensive report. Over the following pages, we'll show you how you can take control of medical treatment for you and your family. We'll guide you through the fog of confusion that can descend whenever you need medical help.

This report will answer all of the questions you've ever thought of asking – and some you haven't, and address every potential problem standing in the way of you receiving the health treatment you deserve. Because you do deserve it!

Don't take no for an answer and don't accept second best. Our NHS is still the envy of the world. Here's how you can make the most of it.

**HORROR OF
DOC IN CANCER
BLUNDER**

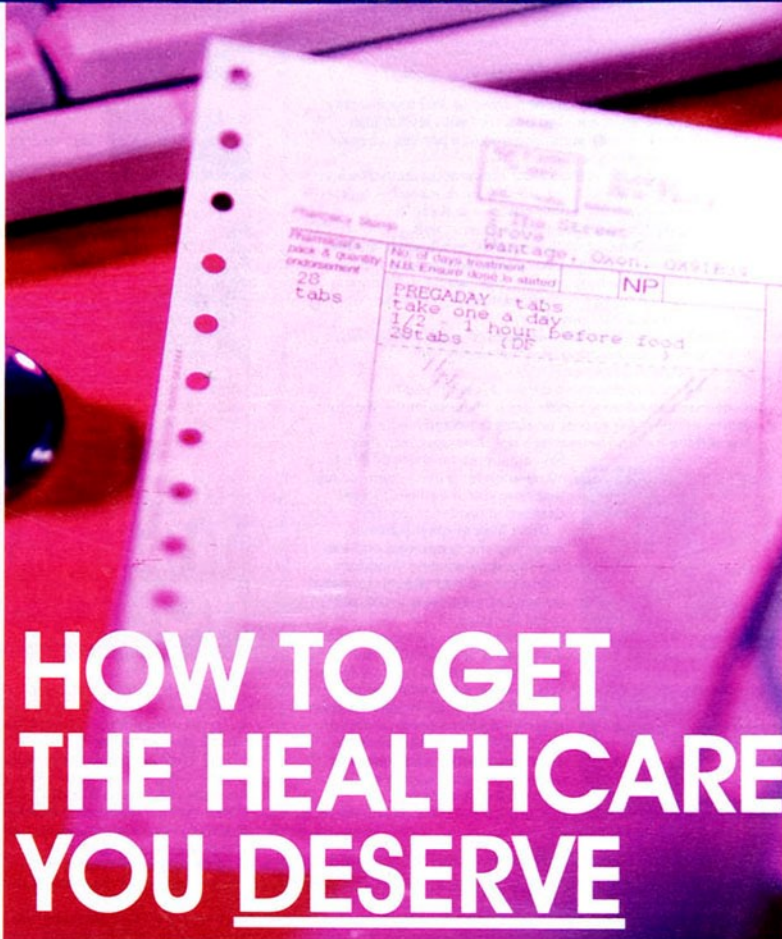
**The sickness
at the heart
of our NHS**

Operations
don't
always
go to plan

**Tears of women
maimed by the
bungling doctor**



Faith had a lucky escape



HOW TO GET THE HEALTHCARE YOU DESERVE



Above, left to right: Alan, Kyron, Nardia, Joshua and Ruth make a conventional family snapshot



'Mum didn't look different after she came out, but she's much happier now'

Nardia, 18, says

I can't recall any particular rows between my parents, but I do know that they argued a lot, and didn't seem happy for a long time. So when my mum called me and my two younger brothers into the sitting room one day, I knew that she had something serious to say. 'This is the moment she tells us they're going to split up,' I said to myself.

I was right – but that wasn't all she had to say. Mum then told us that she didn't want to be with Dad because she preferred women to men. I was about 13 at the time and probably understood the revelation better than my brothers. Even so, the first feeling I experienced was shock.

The idea of Mum being a lesbian didn't horrify me because I knew people at school who'd 'come out' and I'd read about being gay or lesbian in magazines. I suppose my generation are quite accepting of it. I remember that my brothers said something like, 'Fine, but what have we got for tea?'

I was worried about how it was going to affect our family, especially my dad, and I was nervous at the prospect of Mum getting a girlfriend.

The hardest thing was deciding to live with Mum, because I knew how much that upset my dad. I didn't resent Mum, though – I couldn't, because I love her, too. Seeing how the rows stopped made me realise that Mum must have been at the end of her tether. It was the best thing she could have done for all of us.

I had no qualms about telling my friends that my mum liked women, and most of them have been very



Mum told us she was gay – but we just wanted our tea

Even as a teenager, Ruth knew she was a lesbian. But it would take 18 years to finally admit the truth to her husband and children

supportive. There were a few people who shouted things in the street like, 'Your mum's a dirty dyke,' which obviously made me very angry. My instinct was to hit them, but then I'd have ended up in trouble. The best thing I could do was to ignore it.

You might expect a lesbian to look a certain way, but my mum looks just

as she always has, except these days she's always got a smile on her face!

I'd say we've become much closer since she came out, probably because she's far more confident and outgoing now, and I feel I can talk to her about anything.

She also gets on much better with our dad, who has met someone

else since the split, although we still see him all the time.

When Mum said she wanted us to meet her 'friend' Debra, I must admit to feeling a bit nervous about how someone new would fit into our family. That said, I was also excited about meeting another gay woman. The first time we met Debra, she was

DO ANYTHING BETTER

All about
YOU

Why feeling down is good for you!

Shrug off the pressure to be the perfect woman...

Ever feel like you're expected to be Wonder Woman? That everyone around you is allowed to be fed up, get angry and have a rant — but you're the one who's meant to make it all better? And if you do have a 'moment', do you just end up feeling guilty? Well, says clinical psychologist and life coach Jenny Radcliffe, it's time to stop being so hard on yourself.

IT'S OKAY TO... FEEL DOWN SOMETIMES

"Nowadays, if we're not happy *all* the time, we think we're failing," explains Jenny. "But feeling low or down now and again is a perfectly natural reaction to the changing patterns of

IT'S OKAY TO...FEEL FED UP WITH THE CHILDREN

"Having kids involves massive changes in your life. If you were able to go through the experience without a few bad days, you'd be superhuman!" Jenny points out. "When they're naughty or cry for hours, it can feel overwhelming and it's only natural to worry about whether you're doing a good job. Try to make some time for yourself to recharge your batteries. Get friends and family to babysit so you can spend time alone with your partner, and try to keep up at least one hobby. Remind yourself that you're not just a mother — you're still a friend, partner, daughter and work colleague."



life. Don't be ashamed of it — trying to hide your miserable mood will just make you feel worse and you'll miss out on the support you need.

"Remember that people are, generally, flattered to be confided in," Jenny adds. "People like people whom they've been able to help."

IT'S OKAY TO... ENVY YOUR FRIENDS

It's hard not to feel jealous when your mates seem to have perfect partners and earn more than you. But rather than worrying that you're a terrible person for feeling that way, Jenny

says, think about how you can create the life you want for yourself.

"If you think your friend is lucky to be so close to her partner, think of ways you could become more intimate with yours. Persuade him to go to that massage class with you or have more weekends away. If you like her house, why not do an evening course in interior design?"

Remember, though, others' lives may look perfect on the surface, but everyone has their problems. Your friends are probably envious of *your* life!

Kim Jones

Visit Jenny Radcliffe's website at www.lifebalancecoach.co.uk

THEY CALLED ME alien head WHEN I WAS A KID

WAITING for the cameras to roll on the set of TV's *Footballers' Wives*, Sasha Gardner is a million miles away from the frightened schoolgirl she once was.

To look at the stunning model and actress, it's hard to believe that she was once taunted about the way she looked. "I was born with only one ear," says brave Sasha, 23. "Kids can be so cruel and I was called every name under the sun. School was a total nightmare. I was the kid everybody loved to hate."

"Some days I can still hear their voices in my head. They called me alien head, freak, ugly. It was relentless. I suffered every day for years."

And the taunting wasn't the only heartbreak in her life. Her mother walked out and abandoned Sasha and her older sister Hayley, 24, when they were toddlers.

Because her dad worked away from home, as an engineer for a shipping company, Sasha and her sister had to go and live with their aunt Pat who had no kids of her own.

This tragic turn of events just gave the bullies even more fuel for their heartless insults. "I was known as 'the one-eared orphan'. It was so hurtful and I couldn't understand why everyone was being so nasty to me. I always dreaded parents' evenings at school because I was the only one going without a mum and dad."

"When people asked where my mum was I could only tell them I didn't know. I'd wonder why I was so unlucky. All I wanted was to conform and fit in, to be normal, with a mum and dad at home – and two ears like everyone else," she says.

Her dad, Clive, came home every few months to see his daughters but there was nothing Sasha could do about her ear.

"I was born with a little stump instead of an ear. There's no hole so I can't hear out of it. I was told that nothing could be done about it," remembers pretty Sasha, who is 5ft 5ins and a petite size eight.

She desperately tried to hide her disfigurement from classmates but her aunt had a unique way for her to deal with it.

"She was much older and extremely



UNCOVERED: Sasha has a stump for an ear

old-fashioned with firm convictions and beliefs. We weren't allowed pop posters in our rooms, magazines, fashionable clothes or make-up. And she was really tough on me when it came to my ear."

"She said it was nothing to be ashamed of and so every day she'd send me to school with my hair up in a ponytail so it showed. It made me really self-conscious," says Sasha.

"When I got old enough, I learned it was easy enough to take the ponytail out on the way to school, then ruffle my hair over my ear so it didn't show. I'd just put my hair back into a ponytail on the way home."

But her secret was already out and no matter how hard she tried to hide it, her tormentors would never let her forget.

"It wasn't just name calling. I was kicked and punched on a daily basis, too. There were times when I'd open my desk and find bits of paper with the words 'pizza ear' or 'alien head' scrawled across them. I

could hear them giggling and whispering behind my back and I always tried my hardest not to cry, but some days it just got too much," she says.

And there was no sympathy at home if Sasha complained about the bullying.

"Once a group of about 15 kids formed a circle about me and pushed me around in it, calling me horrible names. It was a humiliating experience – I just wanted to curl up in a ball and die."

"When I eventually escaped from them, I ran all the way home crying. I wanted comfort and solace, somewhere to hide."

"But when aunt Pat opened the door, she just wiped my eyes and sent me back to school. 'You can talk, you can walk, you can see, you're one of the lucky ones,' she'd say."

"But it's hard to think like that when you're walking around the school-yard on your own because no one wants to play with you. Harder still when you're being called disgusting names all day long. Looking back, I can see she was trying to make me strong and help me cope with what I was born with."

As a result of the constant bullying, Sasha grew up totally lacking in self-confidence and had no knowledge of her own self-worth.

She wasn't interested in boys because she never thought they'd fancy her. Instead she knuckled down at school and dreamed of a job as a lawyer. She did well and took a job as a receptionist at a legal firm while attending night classes.

But her life took a surprising twist, three years ago, on a Saturday night out. She was with a bunch of mates in a bar when she was approached by a photographer who worked for a local music, listings and fashion magazine.

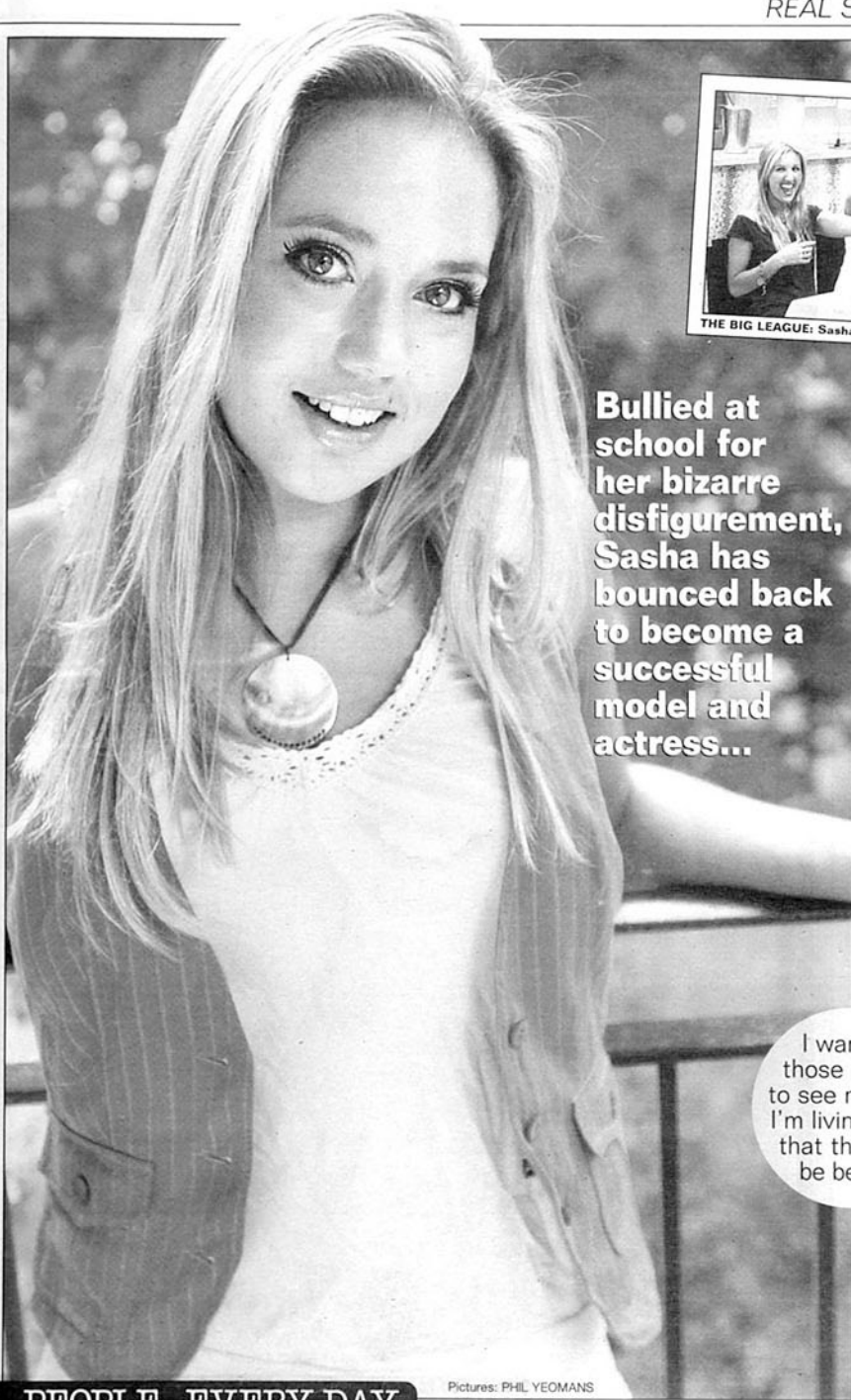
"He asked me if I wanted to do some modeling for a fashion shoot," recalls Sasha.

"I thought he was joking. Who'd want someone like me to do modeling?"

But when he approached me again with his card a few days later, I started to wonder."

It took two weeks for Sasha to pluck up the courage to ring. And just two days later she was on the beach in her hometown of Bournemouth modelling surfing gear.

"It was as if I was just swept along and found myself



THE BIG LEAGUE: Sasha joins *Footballers' Wives*, third from left

Bullied at school for her bizarre disfigurement, Sasha has bounced back to become a successful model and actress...

there, I was absolutely terrified – and really embarrassed too," she says.

"Not only did I feel stupid because I didn't know what to do, I also was petrified they'd notice I had only one ear. The wind was blowing and all I could only concentrate on was holding my hair over my ear. I felt if they saw it, they'd have hauled me out of there in disgust."

"As it was, I hot-footed it straight home after the shoot and put the experience firmly to the back of my mind."

But the pictures got Sasha noticed. She was approached by a clothing firm to do a fashion show, and then a men's magazine contacted her to do a bikini shoot.

"I couldn't believe it was happening," admits Sasha. "I went along to these jobs really believing they'd tell me it had all been a mistake and that I should go straight home."

But it wasn't a mistake and Sasha's modelling career rocketed.

"I can't say it was easy, exposing myself to the camera after years of being told I was ugly and trying to hide away from anyone looking at me too closely."

"But the more I did it, the easier it got. And a room full of people telling me I looked gorgeous helped boost my self-confidence no end. Most times I was so worried about how my body looked, I forgot all about my ear," she laughs.

With jobs pouring in, Sasha left the solicitors to concentrate on modelling and acting for a few years.

"They've kept my job open and I'm still studying in the evenings to become a legal executive so I can fall back on that," says Sasha.

At the end of last year Sasha got a call to audition as an "extra wife" in *Footballers' Wives*. "It was an amazing feeling when I got the job," smiles Sasha.

"The next minute I was sitting in between Zoe Lucker, who plays Tanya, and Laila Rouass, who plays Amber, and opposite Gillian Taylor, who plays Jackie, being told by the director to improvise. What's more, everyone was lovely to me."

"Several people on set found out about my ear but it wasn't a problem and I wasn't discriminated against in any way."

And as the cameras rolled, Sasha cast her mind back to her school days.

"I've come a long way," she insists. "I want every one of the bullies who made my life hell to see me now."

"I'm living proof that bullies can be beaten, they really can."

"I'm happy at last and I like what I see in the mirror now. But I'll never forget it's the inside that counts – beauty's only skin deep."

I want all those bullies to see me now. I'm living proof that they can be beaten

Pictures: PHIL YEOMANS

BY KIM JONES

YourLIFE REAL STORIES.. REAL PEOPLE.. EVERY DAY

Friends star Jennifer Aniston was recently hailed the heroine of Hollywood when she saved the life of a complete stranger.

Jen was enjoying dinner with a male companion at a Mexican restaurant in August, when a man at the next table started choking on his nachos.

While other diners watched in horror, Jennifer sprang into action and performed the Heimlich manoeuvre on the man. Out popped the nachos, the man breathed easy and Jennifer calmly returned to her seat to finish her meal.

An onlooker said: 'She's a heroine – she undoubtedly saved the guy's life. Everyone else was rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do.'

So, would you have been able to 'do a Jen' and save the day? Or would you have been one of the helpless onlookers in the restaurant – freezing in panic and yelling for a doctor in the house?

The British Red Cross recently estimated that of the 4000 people a year who die in the home from accidental injury and collapse, a third might have been saved by first-aid intervention.

But, despite this, the charity claims that only one per cent of the UK population enrolls on first-aid courses. It's a situation it, along with St John's Ambulance, would like to see change.

'It's vital that everyone – no matter what their age – learns some first aid,' says Andrew Walker, Brigade Liaison Officer for St John's Ambulance in Wales.

'From the age of six, youngsters can join our "badger sets", where they learn to pick up the phone and dial 999 if Mum has fallen over and needs help.

'At seven and upwards we teach basic first-aid skills such as applying plasters and bandages. And from the age of 10, as cadets, children learn more complex skills. As a result, many of these youngsters have actually saved lives – which is an amazing feat for anyone, of any age.'

Chrisilla Philogene, 23, from Luton, clearly remembers the day – four years ago – when she came across an elderly woman lying at the bottom of subway steps in the town centre.

'She said she'd been pushed – there was blood pouring from her head and she was shaking uncontrollably,' recalls Chrisilla. 'I didn't have a clue how to help her – I felt so helpless. But there was no one else around, so I called an ambulance and waited with her until it arrived.'

'I didn't know how to control the bleeding and was too scared to try anything in case it made things



Jennifer Aniston came to the rescue and saved a man's life with her quick thinking and simple first-aid skills



Sarah Milledge put her life-saving skills to the test



Chrisilla Philogene is learning first aid after her experience

'You could so easily find yourself in a position to save someone's life'

worse. All I could do was tell her not to move, stay calm and hold her not hand. But of course holding hands doesn't save lives, does it? I can't tell you how relieved I was when the ambulance arrived.'

Chrisilla phoned the local hospital later that day and was told the woman was doing fine, after having stitches in her head and ribs.

'Each time I told the story to friends, I felt more useless,' she recalls. 'The lady might have died in my arms and there would have been nothing I could have done.'

'I started talking about signing up for a first-aid course but I didn't know where to look and, to be honest, I didn't think I could afford it, being a university student.'

'So time passed until earlier this year, I signed up to become a volunteer youth worker. I was delighted, and relieved, to find that basic first aid would be part of my training – so I need never feel that useless again.'

'I'd advise anyone else thinking of doing a first-aid course to go for it. You could find yourself in a position to save someone's life, but would be powerless to act. You'd never forgive yourself if that happened.'

And it's not just strangers in the street you'll be helping.

Says Anita Kerwin-Nye of the British Red Cross: 'The people who are most likely to need you to administer first aid are those you know best – your child, your partner, someone at home or someone at work. If that's not motivation for taking a course, then I don't know what is.'

So what's putting so many of us off the idea? Many experts believe that we're scared.

'Some people assume first-aid courses teach complicated medical

skills that they'll have difficulty in understanding,' says Anita. 'But that's far from the truth. Key life-saving skills can be taught in just a couple of hours.'

'There are some absolute basic actions that can save lives. For example, did you know that what kills most unconscious casualties is a blocked airway?'

'By placing two fingers under the casualty's chin, one hand on their forehead and tilting the head back so that the tongue doesn't block the back of their throat, you could save their life.'

'And if you feel a course is not for you, then you can learn first aid from books or even the internet. Why not get together with a group of friends and make the learning process more fun?'

Sarah Milledge is glad she learned first aid, because her skills saved a stranger's life.

'I signed up to do a four-day course with the British Red Cross about five years ago, when I was leading a local Brownie group,' recalls Sarah, 28. 'I wanted to be equipped to cope in an emergency should one of the children fall ill.'

'The course was really interesting and remarkably simple. I learned how to give the kiss of life, CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and all about the recovery position, treating burns, shock and so on.'

'It was about a year later when I first put the skills I'd learned to use. I was swimming lengths at a public baths when I noticed a figure floating face down.'

'The lifeguards sprang into action and dragged the man – who

was unconscious – out of the pool on to the side.'

'On automatic pilot, I dashed over and told them I was a first-aid. There wasn't even time to panic.'

'I checked for breathing, but there was none, so I began to give the man mouth-to-mouth to get his breathing going.'

'Within a minute or two, he regained consciousness and began coughing up water. But he was still very weak, so I helped keep his breathing going until the ambulance arrived five minutes later.'

'It all happened so fast, but my training came straight back to me.'

'Luckily the man was fine, but it was only after everything had calmed down that I realised exactly how important my actions had been. In situations like those, time is vital – ambulances simply can't get on to the scene in seconds.'

'Anyone can learn basic first aid – even if you're squeamish! There's no blood involved and all the work is performed on a dummy. I can't think of a reason not to give it a go.'

Turn the page for some basic life-saving advice...

'There are key life-saving skills that you can learn in just a couple of hours'

THE ABC OF RESUSCITATION

If you come across someone who's unconscious, check their Airways, Breathing and Circulation (ABC), in that order:

A Check the **AIRWAY** – when a collapsed casualty is lying on their back, the tongue may be blocking the air passage. To correct this, place two fingers under the chin, one hand on the forehead and tilt the head back. If the casualty is breathing, check the tongue isn't blocking the throat and place them in the recovery position – a stable position on their side which keeps the airway open and prevents them from choking on their tongue and/or vomit.

B Check for **BREATHING** – if the casualty is unconscious and not breathing, first call an ambulance, then attempt artificial mouth-to-mouth rescue breathing. Keeping the airway open, pinch the nose of the casualty, take a deep breath, open your mouth and seal completely over the casualty's mouth. Blow firmly until you see the chest rise. Lift your mouth away and watch the casualty's chest – if the rescue breath has been successful, the casualty's chest will fall as the air comes out of the lungs. Repeat with a second breath. Then check for circulation. If there is circulation, give 10 breaths per minute. If breathing returns, place the casualty in the recovery position, checking breathing until the ambulance arrives.

C If **CIRCULATION** stops at any stage during rescue breathing – or if there's no circulation when you first encounter the casualty – then, after opening their airway and giving two breaths, you need to perform CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation) at a rate of 15 chest compressions to two breaths. To find the correct spot on the chest, place the middle finger of one hand on the point where the ribs meet, just below the breast bone; place your index finger next to your first finger, then place the heel of your second hand next to and above your fingers. Cover your second hand with the first, interlacing your fingers. Keep the heel of your hand on the top of the breastbone. Kneel upright, keep arms straight, then give chest compressions, pressing down about 4cm. Release the pressure, then repeat.

ARE YOU A
LIFESAVER?

For a nation obsessed with *ER*, *Casualty* and *Holby City*, it's shocking that only one per cent of us learns simple first-aid skills that could mean the difference between life and death!

'I gave up my breasts & womb to be a mum'

After tragically losing both of her parents to cancer, Vicky Lee faced a devastating dilemma. Could she live knowing she had an 85 per cent chance of inheriting the disease – or should she have radical surgery to increase her chances of survival?



Vicky, a 35-year-old research associate at Manchester University, is married to Darryl, 42, who is co-director of a property firm. They have two girls: Hannah, 12, and Katie, 9

They say there's a special bond between mothers and daughters, and for me that was especially true. My mum had always been my best friend, and losing my dad to oesophageal cancer when I was just seven brought us even closer. Even on my wedding day to Darryl, I was clinging to her in tears – I was 21 and hated the thought of leaving her, even though I was only moving round the corner. So, when mum was diagnosed with ovarian cancer just after I gave birth to our first daughter, Hannah, I simply didn't want to believe it. But mum had a very positive outlook, and as her chemotherapy began, I started to believe she'd be fine. Surely I couldn't be so unlucky as to lose both my parents to cancer?

But only a few months after her diagnosis, mum died, aged just 47. If I hadn't had a tiny baby to care for, I don't know how I'd have coped.

At the time, I knew little about the fact that certain cancers can be hereditary, so I never even considered the possibility that it

might return to haunt me in later life. It was certainly the last thing on my mind when our second daughter, Katie, was born two years later.

But about a year later, I began to feel pain in my side around the time of ovulation. I read an article that mentioned medical screening programmes which were being set up for people who'd lost close family members to cancer, so I saw my GP, who referred me to Manchester's

'It wasn't about me – because of the girls, making the decision was surprisingly easy'

Family History Clinic. My ovaries were examined and seemed to be normal, and to be honest, I wasn't really that concerned about it.

Then, more than a year later, a letter from the Family History Clinic landed on my doormat. It said they'd identified that my mum had developed cancer due to a fault in the BRCA 1 gene, and that there was a 50/50 chance that I might have inherited this gene. I could be tested, but a positive result might mean that I had an 85 per cent chance of getting ovarian and breast cancer.

I brushed the letter to one side. It seemed ridiculous: I was a perfectly healthy 28-year-old. I'd have annual ultrasound scans on my ovaries, but as far as anything else went – forget it. It couldn't possibly happen to me.

But two years later, I got a wake-up call. At my ultrasound scan, the radiographer paused at my left ovary. "There's a cyst – it's probably nothing to worry about...", she told me, but I was terrified. All the fears I'd been hiding away came flooding

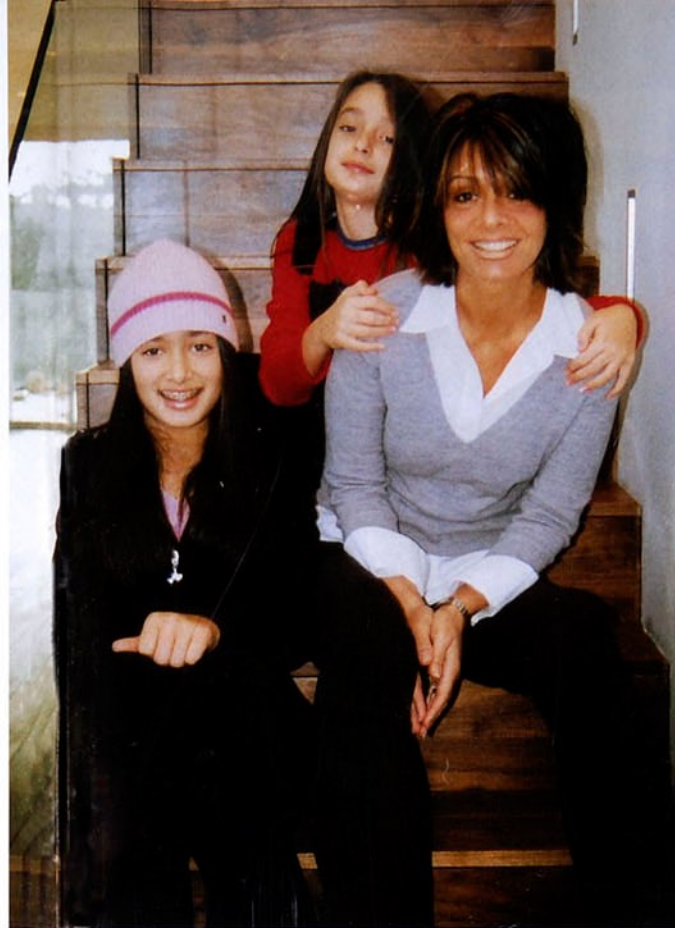
out in a frantic phone call to Darryl. "This is it," I sobbed, "I've got cancer. I just know it."

Luckily, tests proved that the cyst was harmless, but it wasn't enough to put me at ease. Having come so close to believing I might have the disease, I needed to know for sure that I was not a ticking time bomb, about to die and leave my two darling daughters to grow up without their mum. So I asked to be genetically tested for the faulty BRCA 1 gene, although I couldn't believe I'd be so unlucky to carry it.

Two weeks later, I met the Clinic's professor of genetics to get the results – he shook my hand and said, "I'm very sorry to tell you, Vicky, you have the faulty gene." I gripped Darryl's hand and felt my body sway beneath me. Here was the final admission that I'd been trying to deny for so many years – that I wasn't fortunate enough to be free from the shadow of cancer.

When I saw my girls that night, I knew I had to do something. Because of them, the decision was surprisingly easy. I'd have a total abdominal hysterectomy – it was the surest way to be free from a disease that could kill me. I was only 31, but I had two wonderful daughters. I didn't need any more children. As far as the operation meaning that I'd lose my identity as a woman, I'd rather than not be around to watch my daughters – just five and eight at the time – grow up. Luckily, Darryl was behind me all the way.

Surgery was booked for January 1999. It all went well, and when I



woke up, it felt less like I'd lost my womanhood, and more of a relief that I'd got rid of a part of my body that could have harboured disease.

But despite the hysterectomy ruling out ovarian cancer and reducing the chances of me contracting breast cancer, I did still run that risk. The surest way of preventing it would be to remove my breasts. As time passed, worry and guilt started to set in. My girls used to say to me, "I don't know what I'd do without you, mum." Their words were lovely, but especially poignant. I couldn't bear the thought that I wouldn't be around for them one day. Everywhere I looked, there were reports on breast cancer – 38,000 new cases a year, 13,000 women dying – and I began to contemplate a double mastectomy.

Of course, I had doubts and reservations. Would my husband

feel differently about me? Would I be able to cope? But Darryl said he'd support me all the way, and once my mind was made up, that was it. I knew that I had to go for it.

Some friends thought I was being drastic – "Why don't you wait? Have regular check-ups?" they asked me. But I wasn't prepared to gamble – my daughters deserved more than that. "You're very brave," they said.

'People feel sorry for me, as I've had to "mutilate" my body... but I think I'm lucky'

I opted for a double mastectomy that would preserve the outer skin of my breasts with the aim of having reconstructive surgery in the future, but decided not to keep my nipples, as they can be a source of cancer.

I can't deny that it was harrowing. We'd seen photos of mastectomies that were quite shocking – "What will you think of me when I look like

Doing it for the kids: Vicky couldn't put her daughters through the pain she suffered when she lost her own mother

that?" I asked Darryl sadly. He just hugged me and said simply, "I'm going to be grateful that I'll have my wife around for the next 50 years."

The five-hour operation took place in September 2002. I woke up with tissue expanders behind the muscle in my breasts, so I wasn't completely flat – but the sight of breasts without nipples was rather alien-looking.

After a week, I was allowed home. I was really worried about what Darryl would think, but he was pleasantly surprised: "You're as feminine and lovely as ever," he said. Our sex life is still great – and I haven't lost sensation in my breasts.

At the moment, I'm having reconstructive surgery. I've had saline injections twice, so I'm the same size I was before the operation – 32C. I will also be having nipple tattoos sometime soon. I don't feel any less of a woman, but am aware that people reading this may think that I've taken drastic measures to protect myself and my family.

My hopes for the future are simple. As my daughters are at a high risk of carrying the faulty gene too, I pray that by the time they grow up, medical science will have advanced to an even greater degree so they don't have to go through everything that I've experienced. That's why I'm a great supporter of the Genesis Appeal, a charity that aims to build a £10 million breast cancer prevention centre in Manchester – the first one of its kind in

Europe – within the next two years. Although my doctors can never say I'll be totally free from breast cancer, I've decreased the chances to such an extent that my risk is negligible. And if I ever had any doubts that what I've done was for the best, I just need to look at my girls to know I have made all the right moves for all the right reasons.

GENETIC TESTS: THE LOWDOWN

■ Inherited faults on the BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 genes, which we all have, can sometimes lead to breast or ovarian cancer. ■ Genetic testing for faulty genes can be carried out by analysing blood samples. If a woman has a positive gene test result, she may have an 85 per cent chance of developing breast or ovarian cancer. If it is negative, this does not necessarily mean that she won't get these cancers. If you have a family history of cancer, discuss the risks with your GP.



THE GENESIS APPEAL

The Genesis 'Be A Brick' Appeal gives you the chance to purchase bricks at £10 each for the £10 million breast cancer prevention centre in your name or that of a loved one – see www.genesisuk.org.essentialis is making a donation as a thank you to Vicky. If you would like to donate, call Genesis on 08457 04 54 53.

OVARIAN AND BREAST CANCER – FACTS

■ Ovarian cancer is the fourth most common cancer among women in the UK, with around 6,820 new sufferers diagnosed each year. ■ Most ovarian cancers occur in women after they've gone through the menopause. Known

as the 'silent killer' it is often not detected until the cancer grows and causes some pain. ■ Breast cancer affects 1 in 9 women, with 38,000 new cases each year. It's the biggest cause of death for UK women aged 35-55.

Disgusted by my own son

What would you do if you caught your child sexually abusing his little brother? Dawn and her husband Ian faced that awful dilemma. Dawn explains how they coped...

Daniel was getting ready for bed. He stretched out his arms for me to slip on his pyjama jacket. I stopped in my tracks. He was covered in bruises.

'Darling, what happened to you?' I asked him.

'I fell over playing, Mummy,' he replied.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen marks on Daniel, then four, but he always had an explanation. And he spent most of his time playing with his older brother Andy, 12.

What harm could he possibly come to?

Then one day I went upstairs to the boys' bedroom. I opened the door and froze. My stomach flipped over. Andy was performing a sex act on Daniel. This was no game – it was sexual abuse.

It took a second to sink in but when it did I forced myself to stifle my anger. I didn't want to frighten Daniel by letting him see how upset I was so, as calmly as I could, I asked him to come downstairs.

Andy burst into tears and hid under the bed. I could barely get the words out as I explained to my husband Ian what I'd seen. He was pale and shaking.

We sat Daniel down and coaxed him to tell us what happened.

'He's been doing things to me,' he said matter-of-factly.

There were no tears.

It turned out the abuse had been going on for months and poor Daniel almost regarded it as 'normal'. I could see Ian and I had the same thought. We'd failed to protect our little boy. He should have been safe at home but we'd let him down.

When I looked at Daniel's innocent face I wanted to kill the person who had violated him. But I couldn't because that person was my son.

All I felt for him was disgust. 'Where did we go wrong?' I asked Ian as I cuddled Daniel to me.

Surely this kind of thing didn't happen to families like ours. We loved and cherished our children. It

happened to families who couldn't care less about their kids.

'I can't handle this,' Ian said.

Neither could I. We needed someone to tell us what to do.

We found the number for Social Services. There was no reply.

Not knowing where to turn I called the police. Within an hour a patrol car was outside our house.

The police didn't question the boys. They asked me to get them changed into fresh clothes. The items they'd been wearing were needed for examination.

I felt so ashamed. Andy was sobbing, terrified that he was going to be carted off.

We told the officers what had happened. One of them sat Ian and me down and explained that if we made a formal complaint Andy might have to face a court case. If he was charged he'd be placed on the sex offenders register.

Suddenly the enormity of what was happening hit me. Andy was my child and I was about to turn him into a criminal. I turned to Ian.

'I want to protect Daniel but we can't do this to Andy,' I sobbed.

Ian agreed. 'We may hate what he's done but he needs our help,' he said.

This time we would give him another chance.

The next day a social worker phoned and offered to put us in touch with an NSPCC scheme that offers specialist help to children like Andy.

'Let's find out why he did this and then we can work on changing his behaviour,' our case worker told

'I felt like Andy had died. He wasn't my son. I didn't know him any more'

me on the phone.

But our first appointment was three months away. In the meantime, having all of us living under one roof was a nightmare.

Ian and I didn't dare leave the boys alone together. We took it in turns to sit up each night and make



Photo (posed by model) David Porter

sure Andy didn't sneak into Daniel's room. We stopped going out.

terrified of what might happen if we left them with a babysitter. Friends and neighbours wondered why we had become so withdrawn.

I felt like Andy had died. He

to explain why he'd abused his brother. 'I'm not as special as Daniel,' he said.

I felt awful. I thought I'd always been a good mum, sharing my love around. Then he told us that he was being bullied at school. He wanted to take out his fear and hurt on someone else.

Slowly I turned from despising him to understanding him. But I couldn't forgive him.

The NSPCC suggested Andy went to live with his grandmother.

It was a huge relief. Finally we knew Daniel was safe and Andy was able to concentrate on his therapy.

After two years of sessions with the NSPCC my anger had melted away. I realised that if I was going to help Andy I had to let him know I

didn't hate him. 'You'll always be my son,' I was finally able to tell him.

I'd forgiven him. But I'm sure that without the NSPCC's help the abuse would have gone on and on.

Now, after another three years, I feel I've got two very settled children with high self-esteem.

Andy talks to me, which he didn't before. He's happy, funny and has a wide circle of friends. He's at college and looking forward to a career.

It scares me to think he might have been placed on the sex offenders register.

We're lucky we realised in the nick of time that he needed help, not punishment.

Kim Jones

● All names have been changed.

WHEN KIDS GO ON THE REGISTER

The earliest age at which a child can be placed on the sex offenders register in England and Wales is 10 – this is the age of criminal responsibility.

Children who are convicted or cautioned for a sex offence will remain on the register for, on average, half the time that an adult offender would. So, for example, a non-custodial sentence would mean a period of five years on the register for an adult and two and a half years for a child.

The public does not have any access to the register and police release names only on a need-to-know basis, for example to a child's head teacher.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

We asked parents what they would do if they discovered one of their children had committed a sexual offence.



'If a teenager had abused a younger sibling, the chances are I wouldn't want that teenager in the house with us and would agree to having him removed. But I'd be there for him as a mother and would never disown him.'

Lesley Curtis, 35, Banbury, Oxfordshire

'If it's a first offence then a very young child should be helped rather than branded a pervert. But if they continue to offend they should be placed on the register, no matter what their age. They should receive counselling and stay on the register until they are cured.'

Louise Hansley, 32, Middleton, Greater Manchester



'At the tender age of 10 or 12 children don't truly know right from wrong on the sexual front, especially if they've been subjected to adult sexual behaviour on TV.'

'If one of my children did this, I'd stand by them. All children deserve that, no matter what they've done. If

you throw your child out then it's just another rejection for them to deal with.'

Dave Thomas, 55, Llanelli, Carmarthenshire

● What do you think? Write to Bella, 24-28 Oval Road, London NW1 7DT.

SHOULD A CHILD FACE TRIAL FOR OFFENCES?

YES

Detective Inspector Peter Horner, head of the South Yorkshire Police Sexual Offences And Child Abuse Unit says: 'Believe me, the decision is not one that's taken lightly.'

'We will judge each case on its own merits and the decision to haul a child through the courts and prosecute will always be a last resort.'

'But when a child is powerful, dangerous and a risk to other children and adults, then I'd say there is a good argument for going through this process.'

'What we're not talking about are children who are maybe experimenting and playing games like doctors and nurses.'

'There will have been clear evidence of sexual abuse where power, force or threats have been used against another person.'

'By placing them on the sex offenders register we can monitor them and provide assistance with other authorities to help them overcome their problems.'

NO

Dr Andrew Durham of Warwickshire Social Services says: 'What we have got to remember is that we are dealing with children.'

'Some children who have committed sex offences are victims of abuse themselves. In other cases they are imitating something they've seen on the internet or TV.'

'If that's the case then we stand a good chance of getting them to see that what they have done is wrong and to stop such things ever happening again.'

'But placing them on the sex offenders register isn't going to achieve this. Specialist help should be available to these children, not a heavy-handed system of labelling them.'

Dimming the lights, Louise shivered with anticipation. Tonight, with her husband out for a few hours, she was about to have wild and abandoned sex with a total stranger.

But there was no gentle tapping at the front door. No one sneaking in through the French windows. Instead, she sat at her computer, logged in as 'Sexy Tigress' and started to prow.

After a few seconds a 'Horny Hubby, 38' made contact — and a torrid exchange of sexual messaging passed between their computers as they caressed, kissed and finally made love — sharing shuddering climaxes together.

"Discovering cybersex has been a sexual revelation to me," says Louise, 36, a mum-of-two from Yorkshire.

"I've had some of the best, most imaginative, sex online. My husband, Keith, has no idea what I'm up to, but I don't count it as cheating because it enhances our own sex life. I've learned more online than in person, if you know what I mean."

What, exactly, is cybersex? Basically, it's erotic chat via Internet chatrooms or e-mails. The 'virtual' acts of seduction, foreplay and full-blown sex are typed out between participants — often culminating in mutual masturbation and orgasm.

Typical exchanges might be along the lines of *'I'm caressing your breasts, or I'm pulling down your lacy panties,'* but, of



Cybersex — the new adultery

course, the language of seasoned cybersexers can be far more raunchy!

Cheaper, and more anonymous than phone sex, the popularity of cybersex is soaring. But experts fear it's dangerously addictive.

A recent study by the American Psychological Association warned that, of the 57 million people in the US who use the Internet daily, an enormous 4.6 million could become hooked on cybersex.

Sex on the computer with a stranger. It might sound far-fetched, but it's happening in millions of living rooms — and in perfectly normal marriages...



Could cybersex destroy Louise's family life?

Internet use in the UK is on the increase, too. Studies show that 20.4 million adults have accessed the Internet at some time, and with the Government encouraging Internet use by supplying computers to the less well-off, that number is set to rocket.

So how soon will it be before millions of British family computers are sizzling with sex-chat?

Louise reckons there are already thousands of us at it. "Put it this way," she says. "I never have a problem finding a sexual partner online — morning, noon or night."

Testing her theory, our reporter, Kim Jones, tentatively logged into a popular UK server's chatroom.

She describes what happened: "Within seconds, three men had introduced themselves to me with names like 'Married But Looking' and 'Mr Do It Slow'."

"At another chatroom, using the provocative handle of 'Kinky Kimberley' nothing was left to my imagination when 'Dr Luv', 'Sex Slave' and a host of other up-for-it males descended on me for sex. Before it could go any further, I hastily made my excuses and logged off."

"Part of the thrill is that someone always wants to have sex with you," Louise smiles. "I'm 5ft 4in, overweight, with small boobs — but in a chatroom I can become a Barbie Doll with firm 36D breasts. I'm

no longer a wife and mother — I'm a sex object, wanted and desired by lots of men."

"I can be as raunchy and filthy as I want to be. It's a huge thrill to throw aside inhibitions. I've had some of the most amazing orgasms ever online. When Keith comes home, I jump on him. He's chuffed to bits at my new sex drive."

But not everyone agrees it's harmless. For some, cybersex is simply the easiest way of cheating. "If an Internet liaison involves lying, secrecy and some kind of emotional investment with another person, it's indistinguishable from adultery," says Corinne Usher, Consultant Clinical Psychologist at Amersham General Hospital.

In the US, thousands of relationships have been torn apart by the phenomenon and there are now websites dedicated to the problem. The Center for Online Addiction (www.netaddiction.com) offers help, support and counselling to people who discover their partners are having cybersex behind their backs. Special surveillance firms, such as Cyber Affairs, can even detect whether any sexual activity has taken place on a computer.

Relationship experts in this country, too, are seeing the effects of secretive cybersex on marriages. "We've seen the heartbreak online liaisons can cause," says a spokesperson



'Cyberswingers': Nicky and Neil Matthews

from Marriage Care. "For one thing, there's the sense of deceit that this has been going on under their own roof. And even though if there's no physical contact, it's still a form of betrayal resulting in loss of trust."

Relate counsellor Denise Knowles, agrees. "Just the other day I was counselling a distressed woman who'd found her husband in a chatroom with another woman at 2am," she says.

"To these women, it is as much of a betrayal as finding their partners in bed with another woman. Even though there's no meeting of bodies online, there's a meeting of minds. It's this intimacy that's so hard to come to terms with."

Of course, cybersex isn't all about cheating on your partner. Some couples say that it spices up their sex lives and enables them to live out certain fantasies. Others even claim it can prevent real life straying.

Deb Levine, author of *'The Joy Of Cybersex'*, says: "Most couples get into infidelity patterns over time and don't make the effort to try new things."

"Making love becomes a low priority, even though passionate sex is important in keeping a relationship thriving. The Internet can add an element of intrigue into a couple's routine."

Nicky and Neil Matthews from Wiltshire, married for three years, have enjoyed cybersex for almost a year.

"We've both got high sex drives," explains Neil, 24. "We'll go online a few times a week. Sometimes we'll log on together — as 'sexy cyber couple' and hook up with other couples or with a woman for threesome."

"Other times, we'll do it alone. While Nicky's at college I'll have sex with a woman online; anyone will do. I'm easy! "It's just the strange thrill of talking dirty to someone I don't know that turns me on. Cybersex is about feeling good yourself and making other people feel good about themselves, too."

Nicky, 22, agrees. "It's just a bit of fun, really," she says. "The thrill I get is being able to turn on all these men and get them going from the safety of my computer — sometimes four or six at the same time!"

"Everyone in the equation feels good about what's happening: me, Neil and whoever we're cybering with. There's no jealousy or deceit."

Safety, say supporters, is another advantage. Explains Deb Levine: "Cybersex is the safest sex around. It's contact with another person without the fear of sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy."

PR worker Joanne, 25, couldn't agree more. "I enjoy sex, but don't want to sleep around," she says. "I split up with my boyfriend a few months ago and, not long afterwards, a girlfriend and I started propositioning guys in chatrooms while messing on her computer. It was just for a laugh but I got really excited. And I've been doing it in secret ever since."

"The sex is easy and comes without strings. I can usually tell within seconds if someone will be any good at cybersex — if I don't like the sound of them, I can just clear off. That's not so easy on a real date!"

"Occasionally, I go back to the same guy for sex — arranging a time and place online. But mostly I like playing the field."

Clinical Psychologist Corinne Usher, does recognise the positive aspects of cybersex for single women. "It is quite liberating and people can experiment in a relatively safe environment," she says. "But I would warn anyone going into a chatroom to guard their hearts."

"Online relationships are characterised by their intimacy — a great attraction for many women. And even if you just want sex, there may come a time when you find yourself really liking someone you are talking to. But people can lie as much as they want on the net and you may well be spun a line full of deceit."

"Finally, you can't substitute a real-life need by going online."

Deb Levine agrees. "There's no harm in cybersex as an adjunct to real-life. The dangers enter when people start substituting cybersex for face-to-face interactions. It should serve your real-life relationships, not replace them."

"If you can bridge the gap between the virtual and the real, cybersex can be an incredible tool."

Kim Jones

Joanne's, Louise's and Keith's names have been changed



Joanne enjoys playing the field online

THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

CHATROOMS ON THE INTERNET

According to some estimates, an alarming 40 per cent of sites on the World Wide Web are now devoted to sexually oriented material, so it's not difficult to find a sex site which offers a chatroom service.

You often have to pay to enter these sites. Bear in mind, also, the range of material. Many of these sites offer everything from soft and hard-core porn to fetishes and other specialist sex preferences which you might feel uncomfortable with or even offended by.

Most of the UK Internet Service Providers — such as freemove.co.uk — offer free chatrooms where a real mix of people chat to each other. People who want to

indulge in cybersex usually make it quite obvious by giving themselves a sexy name.

There are usually several categories of chatrooms you can join: thirty-somethings, forty-somethings, singles etc, and you can chat to as many people as you like, or go into a private room.

Obviously, not all chatrooms offer sexually oriented material.

There is an ever increasing amount of specialist websites that offer chatroom services where you can talk to like-minded people about any particular topic that interests you — from health and pregnancy, to sport, hobbies, work and so on.

STAYING SAFE

- Never give out identifying information online such as your real name or where you live.
- "Don't use your business address, either," advises Deb Levine. "Go to one of the sites that offers free e-mail, like Hotmail, Yahoo, Excite, etc and create a name just for your cybersex experiences."
- Use your common sense and judgement. If someone sounds creepy, there's a good chance they are. If someone you're chatting with sounds like a teenager,

he or she might be, so stop the conversation short.

- "Don't send or accept files from anyone who asks you to online," advises Corinne Usher. "Don't perform a particular function they might ask you to do as it might allow someone to hack into your computer and identify you."
- It's a bad idea to agree to meet someone you've met online. But if you're determined, take a friend with you. Never go alone.

SIGNS OF A CYBER-AFFAIR

- If someone is having a cyber-affair, they will usually spend a lot of time on the computer under the pretext of working or generally surfing the net.
- Chances are they will stay up much later than usual, as cybersex chatrooms usually begin to heat up late at night.
- They could well become more secretive with their use of the computer by doing the following: changing their password, locking the door of the room they keep the computer in, or even moving

the computer to a more secure place.

- As with real-life relationships, general changes in the person could also be signs that their emotions and energies are being engaged elsewhere. Look for the classic signs: they may become cold, withdrawn, and particularly uninterested in sex.

For more information on your nearest Relate centre, see *Yellow Pages* under counselling or marriage guidance, or visit their website at www.relate.org.uk

'We accidentally got healthy'

You can try every medicine going, but it can often take something seemingly unrelated to turn your health around, as these three women discovered...



'Living my dream healed my soul and my body'

Jo Swabey, 39, an interior designer, lives with her partner, Tim, 52, in London
As the national marketing director for a firm of accountants, I worked very long

hours. Several meetings a day were combined with travelling around the country, or living out of a suitcase abroad. I got used to the pressure, and would put niggling health problems down to

exhaustion and not looking after myself properly.

About eight years ago, I started to suffer from joint pain, which I now know can be a symptom of Crohn's disease. There were mornings when I could hardly get out of bed. But I'd struggle on through the working week – and on any time off, I'd lie in bed exhausted.

I was also plagued with recurring diarrhoea, and lost a lot of weight. I was tired, lacked energy and felt generally under the weather. Looking back, I

don't know how I carried on at work. I suppose I got used to feeling stressed, rotten and unwell and pushed myself harder and harder. In the end, my parents insisted I see a doctor.

In 1999, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. I was prescribed anti-inflammatory medication and told I had to live with the condition. It was a horrible shock. I tried several alternative therapies, such as kinesiology and aromatherapy, but the fact remained that I felt terrible most of the time. The disease is usually characterised by periods of flare-up and remission, but for me, the illness never seemed to let up.

Then, in the summer of 2002, I was rushed into hospital with sickness, diarrhoea and incredible stomach pains. My Crohn's had flared up to such an extent my whole body was debilitated. I also had an infected

gall bladder and gallstones. I was put on steroids – and my gall bladder was removed.

As I lay in my hospital bed, I had time to really think about my life. For years, I'd dreamt of starting my own business in interior design, but when you're so busy, paid a good wage and have a mortgage to cover, you don't do anything about it.

Lying there, away from the culture of work and with nothing much else to do but think, I began to imagine that maybe I really could follow my dreams.

Would I just be putting huge pressure on myself when I should be thinking about getting well again? Starting your own business is no walk in the park. When I broached the subject with my dad, who runs his own business, I thought he might try to dissuade me. But he was all for it.

When I got home, I threw caution to the wind, handed in my notice and enrolled on a college diploma course. I loved being a student, and though I worked just as hard as I did in my job, I was less stressed and enjoyed every minute. I stopped feeling unwell, had more energy and looked forward to a new future. I graduated in the summer of 2003 and set up my own business.

I work hard but the "bad" stress is out of my life. I'm still under pressure when I'm working on a project, but it's pressure

I enjoy. Amazingly, my Crohn's hasn't flared up badly since I left my old career behind – and I'm convinced that's because I'm happy now in the work I do.

I also work hours that suit me, there's far less travelling and I feel more in control of my life – and my illness. If I start to feel a little unwell, I can stop, take time out and give my body a chance to recover. I don't get that dreaded Sunday night feeling anymore – and for the first time since my diagnosis, I sometimes forget I have Crohn's disease at all! For the first time in years, I feel well.

I'm still on anti-inflammatory drugs and will be for the rest of my life, but I've managed to cut back on the dose of steroids I have to take. I definitely feel stress played a part in my condition flaring up and I'm so glad I left behind my old life. I never imagined that changing my career could have such a positive effect.

I also had problem skin, often getting spots. A doctor told me the solution was simple – "Stop drinking and move out of London." I just laughed at the impossibility of it. I remember one day filling in a questionnaire in a women's magazine entitled "Is your toxic lifestyle making you sick?". I realised I had ticked nearly every toxic box, but still I didn't stop.

I met my partner, John, six years ago – he was a plumber at the time, and came to my flat to fix a leak. John lived in the countryside near Tunbridge Wells, so I'd visit him every weekend and loved breathing in the clean air and walking in the countryside. I'd have far fewer asthma attacks there. But back in London, the attacks would be regular. I'd find myself trying to escape the fumes and traffic every lunchtime by taking my sandwiches to the squares and parks in the centre.

Three years ago, I decided to move in with John in Tunbridge Wells and commute to London. There's a saying in my industry that, at the end of every working day, you either turn left and go to the bar or turn right and go home. I found myself turning right more and more because I had someone to go home to.

My son, Finlay, was born two years ago, so I finally gave up my London job and took a part-time

'I moved to the country and left behind my toxic lifestyle'

Michelle Baker and her partner, John Beasley, both 42, live near Tunbridge Wells, Kent

From the age of 20, my life revolved around working in the glamorous world of media and PR, living it up at parties and social gatherings, drinking until the early hours and getting up with a hangover the next day, to start all over again.

When I was around 30, I began to get asthma attacks – no doubt brought on by the many hours I spent in smoky bars, as well as the traffic fumes in central London, where I worked. My body became very sensitive, and even a glass of wine would set off a mild attack. Looking back, my body was telling me I couldn't cope.

I also had problem skin, often getting spots. A doctor told me the solution was simple – "Stop drinking and move out of London." I just laughed at the impossibility of it. I remember one day filling in a questionnaire in a women's magazine entitled "Is your toxic lifestyle making you sick?". I realised I had ticked nearly every toxic box, but still I didn't stop.

I met my partner, John, six years ago – he was a plumber at the time, and came to my flat to fix a leak. John lived in the countryside near Tunbridge Wells, so I'd visit him every weekend and loved breathing in the clean air and walking in the countryside. I'd have far fewer asthma attacks there. But back in London, the attacks would be regular. I'd find myself trying to escape the fumes and traffic every lunchtime by taking my sandwiches to the squares and parks in the centre.

Three years ago, I decided to move in with John in Tunbridge Wells and commute to London. There's a saying in my industry that, at the end of every working day, you either turn left and go to the bar or turn right and go home. I found myself turning right more and more because I had someone to go home to.

My son, Finlay, was born two years ago, so I finally gave up my London job and took a part-time



position at a public relations company in Tunbridge Wells.

After several months of being out of London, I found I didn't have to use my inhaler at all. Although I'd always felt healthier on my weekends in Kent, I'd never imagined that my asthma would disappear completely. Our house overlooks woodland and I now spend hours walking in the fresh air with my son. My skin is clearer and I have a rosy glow I haven't had since my early twenties – it's saying "thank you" for all the fresh air, I suppose.

I've lost a stone, too – thanks to a whole healthier lifestyle and less alcohol. My social life now involves the odd night out with a glass of wine. I also have tons more energy – despite the fact that Fin gets me up at 5.30am every day.

I'm glad I changed my toxic ways in time. Looking back, my life was pretty shallow in the days before Fin came along, and it was certainly hampering my health. My body had been telling me for years it wasn't coping. Now, thanks to a change of home and heart, I'm enjoying life to the full.

Need to know

Asthma

- Asthma is a condition where the airways of the lungs become narrow, causing coughing, wheezing and breathlessness.
- Many things in a toxic lifestyle, including smoking and air pollution, especially in cities, can trigger asthmatic symptoms.
- Some asthmatics find their symptoms are worsened after drinking alcohol – especially wine. Experts believe this may be caused by the sulfites added to wine as preservatives.
- For more information, visit www.asthma.org.uk or speak to an asthma nurse on 0845 701 0203.



'My mummy tummy has gone – thanks to my son!'

Sheryl Godwin, 38, and husband David, 43, live in Cardiff with their five-year-old son, William

I put on 3st when I was pregnant, ballooning to 13½st, and from a size 12 to a 16. After William was born, try as I might, I couldn't shift the weight. I joined slimming clubs and went on fad diets and, though a few pounds would drop off, they'd soon sneak their way back on.

I was still in my maternity clothes when William was two. It was awful being so big but I almost resigned myself to the fact that this was what happened after having a baby. Then I was diagnosed with an under-active thyroid, which made losing weight even more difficult.

But to be honest, my main concern was William's own weight. As a baby, he was often sick after he'd eaten, and when he was a toddler, he began losing weight rapidly. Aged two and a half, he was diagnosed with coeliac disease – a life-long inflammatory condition of the gastrointestinal tract. It meant foods containing gluten – which would damage the lining of his intestine and could lead to malnutrition, osteoporosis and even bowel cancer – were banned from his diet. Gluten is

found in bread, pasta, cakes, biscuits and pastries, but also in less obvious foods, such as chocolate, cooking sauces and sausages, so I had to check food labels on everything I bought.

Six months later, doctors found that William was also diabetic. He had to be injected with insulin twice daily and we had to keep careful tabs to ensure his blood-sugar levels were neither too low nor too high – or he could fall into a coma.

I'd spend hours in the supermarket, scanning ingredients to make sure foods were suitable for William, and it struck me how many additives, hidden salts, sugar and hydrogenated fat there are in most of the foods I normally bought. I began to look at

what we ate in a completely different way.

There were so many things in packaged foods which could harm William that I began to ditch the processed foods I'd been used to and bought fresh ingredients to make foods from scratch – curries, chillies, soups, salads and steaks.

The packaged chicken Kiev was replaced with a whole chicken, which I'd roast with garlic. If we went out to a café, I'd order coffee without the usual cake because it wouldn't be fair to eat forbidden foods in front of William. Because William is allowed to eat as much fruit as he likes – apart from bananas and grapes – I made sure the fruit bowl was always full and we'd snack on them together.

I found my diet was becoming healthier and the pounds began to fall off, at first without my realising it, but eventually my

clothes began to feel loose. My tastes began to change, too. Whereas I'd craved chips and creamy curries before, my body became used to healthier stuff and I'd find lots of foods too greasy for me. The excess weight has fallen off and I now weigh about 10st 10lb. I feel great and have lots of energy.

I have William to thank for my weight loss. I owe it to him to set a good example as far as healthy eating is concerned. He is so accepting of his condition – he's a real inspiration to me.

Improve your health – by accident!

- **CHANGE A COMPUTER-BOUND DESK JOB** to working outdoors and you could avoid a wide-range of computer-related illnesses, including headaches, eye strain, neck and back problems and RSI, a condition that causes numbness or pain in the upper arms and neck.
- **IF YOU MAKE LIFE CHANGES** that make you truly happy, scientists say you could be much healthier, too. A study found that happy people produce less of the stress hormone cortisol, which is linked to hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.
- **IF YOU'VE JOINED A GYM TO LOSE WEIGHT**, it could help you stave off depression. Studies have shown that physical activity keeps you mentally well because exercise releases uplifting chemicals in our bodies. Joining a gym class is also great for depression as social contact boosts mood.
- **IF YOU'VE BEEN DITCHING THE CAR** in favour of walking in an attempt to be 'green' or to save money on petrol, you'll also be giving yourself health benefits. Walking is one of the best ways to combat osteoporosis as it strengthens your bones. Plus, walking at an average speed of 3mph for half an hour can burn off 99 calories.