

My health lessons from breast cancer

Two years ago, TV presenter Julia Bradbury heard the words every woman dreads: 'You have breast cancer.' As October is Breast Cancer Awareness month, she shares how that diagnosis has changed her attitude to health for the better

Like many people, I used to take my own good health for granted. In fact, my GP once called me 'medically boring'. But then I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was filming in Costa Rica in February 2020 when I discovered a lump in my left breast. After a mammogram, I was relieved to be told it was a benign group of microcysts – nothing to worry about, but I was advised to keep an eye on it and watch out for changes.

A follow-up mammogram a year later also didn't show anything, but because my breast tissue is quite dense (which makes calcifications and tumours difficult to spot), the doctors recommended I had an ultrasound scan a few months later.

That's when an ominous dark spot was noticed. A biopsy revealed those benign microcysts were, in fact, a 6cm cancerous tumour that needed to be surgically removed.



I remember feeling really sad, and shocked and frightened. I heard the word 'cancer' and felt like my brain was exploding. An overwhelming cloud of dread came over me. The grief kicked in almost immediately. Grief for my health, grief for my life as I had known it, grief for that naïve belief that I was invincible, and everything would always be all right. One in seven women will get breast cancer in their lifetime – it's a club that no one wants to join and I never thought I'd become a member.

I was booked in for a mastectomy of my left breast a month later, in October 2021. In the weeks leading up to the operation, I didn't know what to do with my feelings of uncontrollable sadness; I was surprised by the volume of unexpected tears. And I was unprepared for how alone and helpless I felt, despite the unwavering love and support of my family.

The day before my surgery, I took the advice of a doctor

friend, who'd had a double mastectomy. She told me to say a formal farewell to my breast. So, I thanked it for all its years of service; the breastfeeding, the bikinis, the jiggling about when running for a ball. I'm glad I did, because acknowledging what I was about to go through helped me to heal afterwards.

I'm lucky that the doctors managed to remove the tumour completely and although it's impossible to remove every cancer cell, I was relieved to be told I wouldn't require chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

I hesitate to say that I'm now cancer-free or 'cured', but I am confident that I have 'no sign of disease' and I happily call myself a 'cancer thriver'.

But it turns out that cancer is a lifetime diagnosis. It is something you must deal with for the rest of your life. When I woke up from my surgery, I promised myself that I would prioritise health and happiness over everything.

I decided to prioritise my health and happiness over everything

MAKING CHANGES

I used to live at breakneck speed, forever pushing myself emotionally and physically to reach impossible goals and forcing my body into unnatural rhythms. I disregarded sleep, drank too much and ate refined sugar by the bucketload.

But there is nothing like being diagnosed with a deadly illness to make you re-evaluate everything. My children – 12-year-old Zephyr, and eight-year-old twins Zena and Xanthe – are so young and I'm determined to live for many more years to see them grow up.

Every breast cancer is different and everybody is unique, but there's solid research to show that improving your lifestyle can have significant protective benefits, whether you've had cancer or not. Here are all the things I do now. Why not join me?

1 UP YOUR ACTIVITY LEVELS

Recovering from cancer has taught me that to keep body systems working well, you need to keep moving.

I've always been an avid walker – I've even written books about the many health benefits and joys of walking – but I'm making it even more of a priority now. I walk at least 10,000 steps every day – that is my essential movement and mental health time.

In addition, I exercise four times a week to keep strong and maintain

muscle: two sessions of weight training (which might be using logs and benches when I'm on a walk), yoga or qigong and tennis. Research shows that if I exercise, the chance of my breast cancer coming back decreases by approximately 20%. My determination to live longer beats every groggy start, and every temptation to take the escalator rather than the stairs.

I urge you to get stretching your legs and flexing your muscles.

2 EAT WELL

What we choose to eat three times a day is one of the most important decisions we can make regarding our health. Before cancer, if you'd lifted the flap on my rucksack, you'd usually have found a bacon sandwich (brekkie on the move); milk chocolate; millionaire's shortbread; a flapjack; a ham or Cheddar cheese sandwich; crisps; a bag of wine gums and an apple. If we were on location, that's what I'd eat for 18 days straight. Every night I'd tuck into a big pub dinner followed by some gloriously sticky pudding.

When I look at that list now, I shudder. There's some research linking fried food and processed meats with carcinogenic compounds, and there's a growing body of evidence about the

damage too much sugar does to human health in general.

So now I follow a low-carb, broadly ketogenic diet. I've switched to dark chocolate (anything over 70% cocoa), cut down on red meat (once a week, from a local farm) and cut out alcohol. We also eat organic food as much as possible in a bid to reduce the toxin load on my body.

I don't touch breakfast cereal any more, but I'll start my day with hot lemon water and fast until 10am, when I'll have a savoury brekkie of steamed veggies, sometimes eggs and maybe some mackerel with avocado, followed by berries, nuts and seeds with some plant-based yogurt. No bread. My one coffee of the day comes last, made with coconut milk and mushroom powder.

3 DON'T SACRIFICE SLEEP

Before cancer, I didn't take sleep or stress seriously. There's no medical test to show if that made me more vulnerable to breast cancer, but there is evidence that the disrupted sleeping patterns that arise from long periods of shift work can contribute to breast, prostate and colorectal cancer. Over the years, late nights, air travel, work, IVF treatment and having babies have all taken their toll on my sleep miles. When I asked neuroscientist Professor Russell Foster if my bad

sleep history played a role in my breast cancer, he confirmed the link, telling me: 'If you're vulnerable, then poor sleep is an increased risk factor. I would never say it would cause cancer but if you're on that spectrum, then it can nudge you over.'

I know that learning to prioritise sleep has helped my recovery. Now, I'm disciplined about being in bed by 10pm. I make sure my bedroom is dark and cool. I finish eating at 6 or 7pm with the children and start winding down with them. I switch off all the screens and have a podcast lined up to listen to if I do wake up in the night. It works a treat. And I even stick to my sleep routine at weekends.

There's
nothing like a
cancer diagnosis
to radically change
your outlook

4 BATHE IN MORNING LIGHT

One of my most important daily rituals involves sticking my head out of the bathroom window, rain or shine, as soon as I wake up, after my morning wee. The morning light works directly on the human brain, setting the internal clocks that are critical to every cell in our body and that help to govern how we function over the course of the day. Those few minutes spent by my window are time on my own in peace and quiet. It allows me to express gratitude and to practise a bit

of meditation. It has been a life changer. I feel energised and ready for anything – even the chaos of getting the children ready for school.

5 BREATHE PROPERLY

I have discovered a simple breathing exercise that helps me handle stress. I make sure my exhalation is longer than my inhalation to activate my parasympathetic nervous system (the calming 'rest and digest' mode), which tells every cell in my body that everything is okay.

I breathe in through my nose for a count

of four, and out for six. I will do this throughout the day when I need to calm myself down. When we're stressed, the worst thing we can do is take a big deep breath through the mouth. Gasping like this won't calm you down or help get oxygen into your body. Instead, nasal breathing – through the nose – helps to bring in more oxygen and purify the air.

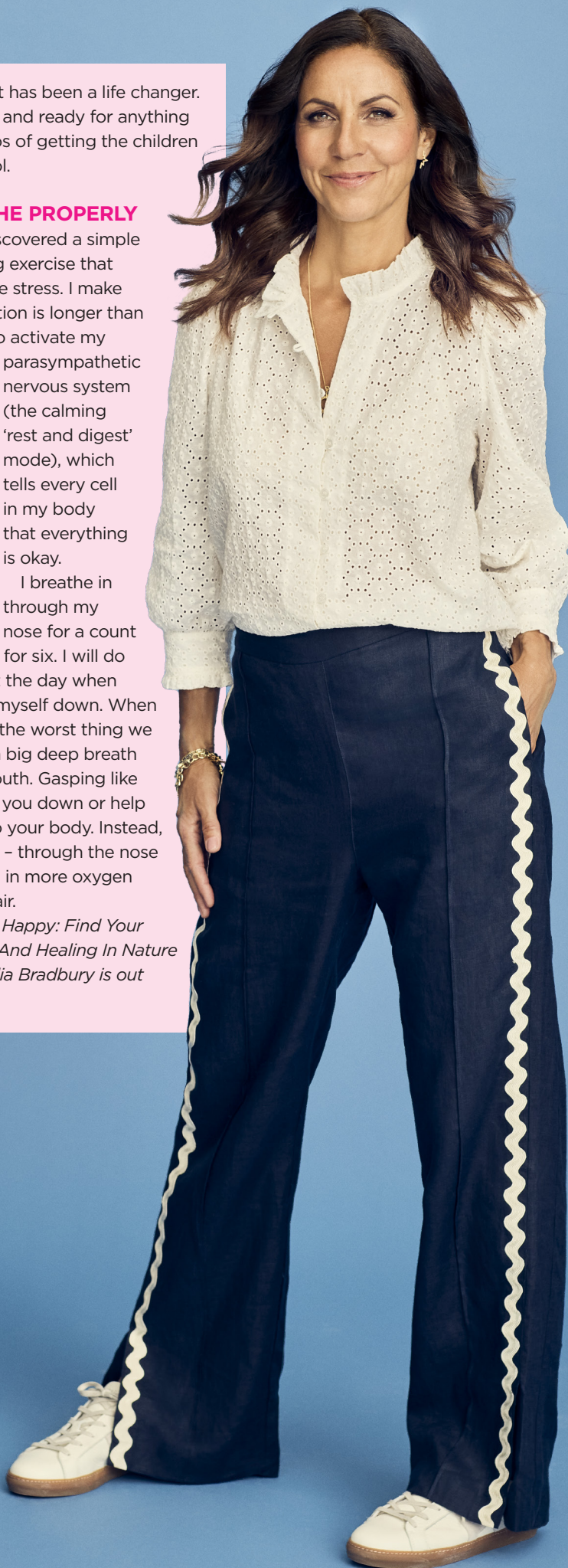
• *Walk Yourself Happy: Find Your Path To Health And Healing In Nature (Piatkus)* by Julia Bradbury is out 14 September

CHECK YOUR BREASTS

According to Cancer Research UK (cancerresearchuk.org), breast symptoms to look out for include:

- A new lump or thickening in your breast or armpit
- A change in size, shape or feel of your breast
- Skin changes in the breast, such as puckering, dimpling, a rash or redness of the skin
- Fluid leaking from the nipple (if you're not pregnant or breastfeeding)
- Changes in the position of the nipple

Although these symptoms can often be caused by other medical conditions, if you have any of them, ask your GP to check. The earlier cancer is picked up, the easier it is to treat and the more likely the treatment is to be successful. □



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