

Diet saves Samantha from life of chronic pain



NEW LIFE: Samantha Porter, right, at her party with the other contestants in Channel 4's Come Dine With Me Royal Wedding Special.

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THOUSANDS of people suffer from a painful and debilitating condition, and yet it often goes misdiagnosed. Grace Hammond reports.

A FEW hours after Prince William and Kate Middleton exchange vows, viewers of Channel 4's Come Dine With Me Royal Wedding Special will be able to see mother-of-three Samantha Porter compete for a £3,000 prize for holding the best street party.

Only a year ago, celebrating was the last thing on her mind, as the 39-year-old business development manager battled to take control of a chronic condition. The effects are so painful and life-limiting that, according to a charity founded to support sufferers, it can result in relationship breakdowns, curtailed careers, and, in extreme cases, some sufferers may even contemplate suicide.

"It was in October 2009 when the symptoms first appeared. I was on holiday in Yarmouth with my partner, when I got what I thought was just a normal case of cystitis," says Samantha. She was prescribed antibiotics by a local GP, and began drinking cranberry juice, commonly thought to be effective to treat or prevent bladder infections. "I now know that was the worst thing I could possibly have done," she says ruefully.

Little did she know it, but Samantha had developed the first signs of interstitial cystitis (IC), an incurable condition, the exact causes of which remain a mystery. The long-term inflammation of the bladder wall may be triggered by a variety of genetic, behavioural and environmental factors.

It took months for Samantha to finally be diagnosed after a referral to a hospital urology unit. Her ordeal, however, had only just begun. Test after test later, she was still no nearer to finding relief or a cure for the agonising condition. "The doctors were scratching their heads – they didn't know what to do. They told me, 'We've done all we can'. All conventional treatments had failed – and investigations found that my bladder looked healthy," she says.

"Eventually, I was told I was wasting their time, that worrying about it was only making it worse, and that I should take anti-depressants."

Robert Pickard, professor of Urology at Newcastle University, acknowledges that IC is difficult to diagnose. He says: "It can be very difficult to offer really effective treatment. Symptoms can be

socially disabling, and it can be very frustrating and traumatic for sufferers.” He describes IC as ‘bladder pain syndrome’, a collection of symptoms and findings, rather than a disease, and says there’s no single identifying cause, although infection is one possibility being considered.

Samantha describes her months suffering the condition as “absolutely hellish” and despite a supportive partner, Gavin, she felt isolated. “I tried not to let it affect my sex life, but I was always conscious of it. Living with IC is so depressing,” she says. Eventually, after contacting the COB Foundation, a fellow sufferer suggested the ‘IC-Diet’, which is also recommended by some NHS urologists. “Ironically, one of the first things you’re told is not to drink cranberry juice,” she says. “The idea is that you remove all the acid from your diet. There’s an enormous list of things that are definitely bad for your bladder, things which might be, and things which are considered ‘safe’. “The most ‘dangerous’ things you can have are alcohol – red wine particularly – coffee, tea, fruit juices, fizzy drinks and tomatoes. “Although it’s boring, I stuck to the diet very, very seriously and drank only bottled water. Within two months, my symptoms had almost completely disappeared. It was as if the bladder had finally been given a chance to heal itself.”

As her symptoms faded, she was able to reintroduce some of the problematic foods, and, after a year, has recovered and isn’t limited in her diet.

Come Dine With Me Royal Wedding Special, April 29, 8pm on Channel 4.

IC: CAUSE AND EFFECT

SYMPTOMS of IC can include chronic pain in the abdominal, urethral or vaginal areas, urinary urgency and frequency, urinary discomfort and pain during sexual intercourse. A tiny percentage require surgery to entirely remove their bladders; there are around 50 such cases a year in the UK. IC affects nearly 200,000 women in the UK, with women 10 times more likely to suffer from it than men, and the number of patients aged in their 20s and 30s is rising. For more information on The Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation (COB), call 0121 702 0820 or visit www.cobfoundation.org.