

My story

Women like you reveal how they coped with health problems

Women just like you

Caring about animals cured my IBS

Samantha Flower, 36, from London, suffered years of agony from stomach problems until a change of lifestyle revealed the solution... and opened the door to a new career



My late teens were a nightmare – I suffered from excruciating stomach cramps and nausea, which came on after eating, or when I felt stressed while studying for exams. It got to the point where I was afraid of being away from home in case an attack came on. I longed to be a typical teenager, so couldn't resist joining in on alcohol-fuelled nights out on the town with the obligatory junk-food binge afterwards. Yet, while my friends nursed mild hangovers the following morning, I'd be clutching my tummy in agony for days, feeling as if I was at death's door, and hiding in the house until I felt well again.

I'd been to the doctors so many times over the years I lost count, and would come away with various painkillers but no real explanation for the gut-wrenching agony I suffered. It was labelled as 'one of those things'. But the situation came to a head one day when I fainted from the pain. When I came to, I found myself in a pool of blood with my front tooth knocked out.

My parents were beside themselves with worry and wanted answers. They were afraid it might be cancer, so hauled me to a specialist gastroenterologist and I had an endoscopy – a test using a narrow, flexible, tube-like telescope called an endoscope – to examine my bowel and stomach. The results ruled out other serious conditions and I was diagnosed

with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and prescribed antispasmodic drugs.

The diagnosis was a relief – but the drugs didn't solve the problem. I just learned to live with my condition and never went out without painkillers and peppermint tablets, plus the prescription drugs in my bag at all times. When things were really bad, I'd be downing a bottle of Gaviscon (liquid antacid) daily to try to calm the fire I felt in my gut. It was no way to live.

To be honest, I got to a point where I all but gave up on my health. I was so used to looking and feeling unwell, that I stopped caring what went into my body. Caffeine and cigarettes

became the fuel that kept me going.

But then I got into animal welfare and became a vegetarian.

Within a few months

of giving up meat, I began to feel healthier. I stopped getting colds and would wake up before midday – something I hadn't done in years! I'm not one to do things by halves, so I went even further and decided to give veganism a go – cutting out meat and animal products such as eggs, cheese and milk.

It was a decision that was to change my life in a huge way. For the first time in years, I went weeks without an IBS attack. My stomach was free from pain after eating, I had bags of energy and my skin was clear and my eyes bright.

I ditched my tablets as I realised my IBS must have been caused by something in my

diet I was sensitive to. In my spare time, I started reading up on nutrition and foods that might have triggered my attacks. A common culprit seemed to be dairy foods.

Not daring to go back to eating my old diet, I remained a vegan for a few years, but my body craved fish so

I eventually decided to add that to my diet.

If I ever went out for dinner and found I'd eaten a sauce with milk or cheese in it, I'd get the familiar rumblings and pain, which convinced me my intolerance to dairy products had been the cause of all my pain over the years.

I felt extremely fortunate to have found my own cure through food and nutrition, so I eventually decided to give up my job in publishing and study to become a nutritional therapist...and now I help other people improve their health through diet.

◆ Visit samanthaflower.co.uk.

Is it IBS – or just a funny tummy?

- ◆ 12 million people in the UK suffer from IBS – the name given to a variety of abdominal complaints.
- ◆ The most common symptoms are constipation, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating – some experts believe it's caused by an abnormality in the muscles of the large bowel.
- ◆ Diagnosis is made when sufferers have had symptoms for more than 12 weeks in a 12-month period – persistent problems are seen to be more than the odd 'dodgy tummy.'
- ◆ Triggers can include food intolerances and stress.
- ◆ Treatments include antispasmodic drugs such as mebeverine (Colofac) and hyoscine (Buscopan). Some come combined with a fibre supplement – eg, Fybogel mebeverine. Peppermint oil also has an anti-spasmodic effect.
- ◆ Find help at ibs-relief.co.uk.

The pain was so bad I fainted, and woke up in a pool of blood