

Northwood cancer survivor shares his experience to raise awareness

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By Steve Watkins

A NORTHWOOD man is helping others come to terms with cancer after recovering from the disease himself.

John Helm first realised something was wrong when he noticed flecks of foam around his mouth.

He began having trouble swallowing food and saw his GP, assuming a statin prescription was to blame.

He drew a blank and the curious gagging sensation worsened over time until he survived on soups and pureed food.

His next trip to the doctor set alarm bells ringing when they found his weight had plummeted by several stone.

John, 72, who lives in Copse Wood Way, said: "I guess I am a typical man in that I just soldiered on, despite the fact I would often bring up solid food almost as soon as I had eaten it. My weight had dropped from around 12 to seven stone."

An internal camera picked up a cancerous tumour at the base of John's oesophagus or food pipe that empties into the stomach.

John added: "The nurse told me I had cancer. It didn't register at first. It felt like I had something foreign inside me. I just wanted it taken out as fast as possible."

Three bouts of chemotherapy and one operation later, John was lucky enough to recover and showed his gratitude to medical staff by agreeing to talk with other patients diagnosed with cancer.

"I can't repay the debt I owe staff at Mount Vernon and St Mary's hospitals," he said, "but I can try and, when my surgeon asked if I could share my experience with others, it was the least I could do."

More than 11,000 people are diagnosed with oesophago-gastric cancers in the UK every year. It predominantly affects the over-60s, with men twice as vulnerable as women.

Tell-tale signs include difficulty swallowing, vomiting, weight loss, coughing and indigestion that won't go away.

Smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and diet are all contributing factors, as with so many other types of cancer, but John wonders if a five-year job placement in Kuwait after the first Gulf War was a contributing factor.

"I was working on a major hotel refurbishment," he said, "and we had to contend with all the pollution from the oil wells that retreating Iraqi forces had blown up, as well as the depleted uranium used in ammunition lying around.

"I can't prove it had anything to do with that, but it wasn't the healthiest environment to work in.

"I'm just glad I got a second chance and also volunteer as a patient representative on the London Cancer Alliance's Oesophago-Gastric Pathway Group.

The NHS is launching the second of five campaigns raising awareness of cancer and its symptoms on Monday.

The campaign will focus on oesophago-gastric cancer - that's throat and stomach to us lay people - with an emphasis on the over 50s.

The key messages are: 'Food sticking when you swallow could be a sign of cancer - tell your doctor' and 'Having heartburn, most days for three weeks or more, could be a sign of cancer - tell your doctor.

An earlier pilot in northern England found a 52% increase in urgent GP referrals for suspected cancer cases.

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