



Health

Lily Allen songs in my head were clue to brain tumour size of an orange



Inspirational ... Nicole Witts

BRAIN tumours kill 4,000 people every year in the UK - more than any other cancer.

Yet the condition gets just one per cent of all cancer research funding.

Mum-of-two Nicole Witts had eight wrong diagnoses before scans showed a tumour the size of an orange in her brain.

Had it been caught earlier Nicole might not have been left with epilepsy, which means she is unable to do things other mums take for granted - like cooking, and bathing her children.

But despite her two-year ordeal, she remains incredibly upbeat - even taking part

in a Calendar Girls-style photoshoot to raise awareness for Brain Tumour Research.

And on the right is part of her moving "bucket list" of things she decided she wanted to do before she died to prove her life was worth fighting for.

Nicole, 39, from Leighton Buzzard, Beds, has two daughters, Megan, five, and Ellen, one. Here she tells Sun Health her incredible story.

A washing machine was forever whirring inside my head. Then I started getting skull-splitting headaches and mood swings.

It was when I started hearing voices and Lily Allen's record Alfie on loop that I really knew something was wrong.

I had already seen seven different GPs, all of whom fobbed me off with some useless medication to treat the wrong issue.



Tumour ... orange-sized growth on Nicole's brain

And when I called my surgery and spoke to a locum doctor on the phone he laughed down the phone and asked if I'd been taking drugs or drinking. He said to call back if the symptoms didn't go away, slammed the phone down and I just fell to the floor and wept.

Nobody would listen to me. I hadn't even told my husband Gary, 40, as I didn't want him to think I was mad.

But soon after that Gary saw the sheer terror in my eyes when I quickly turned

around hearing my daughter Megan behind me - then realising she wasn't at home. I told Gary the whole story, handed in my notice at work and that very afternoon I had my first full-blown fit in front of Gary, Megan and Ellen.

I bit my lip so hard there was blood everywhere, my eyes were rolling back and I was shaking violently.

Gary sent Megan out to a neighbour's house for help but she was so affected by it she was found in the middle of the road shaking and crying.

I was taken straight to Luton & Dunstable Hospital by ambulance but while waiting to see a doctor I started hearing Lily Allen again and had another fit.

Doctors pumped me full of anti-fitting medication and gave me a CT scan which showed a big lump in my head. Then I had a more detailed MRI scan.

Sitting in a corridor outside with all sorts of people walking past, a doctor approached me and dropped the bombshell for the first time that I had a brain tumour and, although he couldn't be sure, it was likely to be an aggressive, malignant tumour.



Battle ... Nicole in hospital

He walked away and left me there alone to absorb my death sentence. I'm not religious but ran to the hospital chapel where I fell down on my knees and started shouting angrily: "Why me? I've got two kids. What have I done to deserve this?"

It just seemed so unbelievably unfair.

I had a week of sitting at home alone, thinking these could be the last few days I would ever see my children, before I was admitted to the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead for my first consultation with a specialist.

The neurosurgeon there told me the tumour was as big as an orange, had been growing steadily for nearly ten years and if it continued to grow I'd be dead by August. I needed to have it removed straight away.

He also told me it was benign, a less aggressive type of tumour, so there was some light at the end of the tunnel. He explained nobody comes out of neurosurgery without being affected in some way.



Loving ...with husband Gary and children Ellen and Megan

There was a chance I would die and the surgery could easily catch a nerve leaving me paralysed, speechless, blind or deaf for the rest of my life. I can't explain it but I felt I was in safe hands and signed the form in a flash. I had to fight. I wanted to see my children grow up. It was my only chance.

I had the nine-hour operation in March 2008 and within an hour of waking up knew I was still me - I wasn't paralysed.

I could talk and I knew who all my family were. But sadly, I was left with pretty severe epilepsy and my short-term memory was almost non-existent.

I was told I had a 30 per cent chance of the tumour coming back so, lying in the hospital bed, I started putting together a "bucket list" of all the things I wanted to do before I die.

One was to raise awareness of brain tumours. I was just so angry at how, if it had been picked up earlier, I might not have had complications during surgery and I wouldn't have lived through those traumatic weeks planning my own funeral.

The original list had 30 pledges and I achieved all of them before my first yearly check-up in March 2009 - raising thousands for the fantastic Brain Tumour Research, which has 18 charities under its wing.

So I've started adding to the list.

On March 14 this year I achieved number 53 - to be photographed nude to raise awareness.

I was petrified, but there's nothing I won't do to spread the word.

To find out more about Nicole's bucket list or to make a donation, go to braintumourresearch.org

Nicole's bucket list

- 1) Must not moan!
- 2) Make-up is really not important
- 3) Don't be scared of flying or worms
- 4) To raise money for brain tumour awareness or the Neurosurgery Unit at the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead
- 5) Never ever get frustrated with my lovely children
- 6) Do not suffer fools gladly
- 7) Be direct and fairly honest
- 8) Don't be shy
- 9) Know that small boobs really aren't too bad
- 10) Know I can drink tap water, it does not have to be bottled

- 11) Hospital food is yummy
- 12) Get my brain back to normal
- 13) Really appreciate good friends and family
- 14) Enjoy walking everywhere
- 15) Try eating hot curries with Gary
- 16) Eat lots of mum-in-law's yummy trifle before anyone else digs in
- 17) Learn to enjoy getting up early
- 18) Clean properly under sofas and not go around them
- 19) Contact lost family and friends
- 20) Get out and catch up with friends every now and then
- <break/>
- 21) Get some hobbies again - reading and puzzles in particular
- 22) Make a huge and heartfelt thank you to everyone who's supported me at my charity events
- 23) Get into a newspaper to promote the charity
- 24) Wear a skirt for the first time
- 25) Get up on stage and sing
- 26) Go up in a hot air balloon
- 27) Sing songs on a mic at toddler group without knowing words
- 28) Go on stage in my underwear at a fashion show
- 29) Become friends with medical additions like the pee bag I was forced to wear
- 30) Don't be frightened to say directly what I think
- 31) Get my own group for brain tumour awareness started (Head 1st on Facebook)
- 32) Get more members and some well known patrons (ex-boxer Billy Schwer and MP Andrew Selous)
- 33) Visit House Of Commons for brain tumour support and funding.

- 34) Get more press by going under professional umbrella group
 - 35) Get my own website
 - 36) Sponsor my own lower school football team with Head 1st bibs for Pulford Pirates
 - 37) Organise and run a charity musical fundraiser
 - 38) Get Waitrose to sponsor me (£360 in February 2010).
 - 39) Get funds from local Ferrari group (got donation of £1,000)
 - 40) Allocate a day each month to bond with Megan
 - 41) With help of friends, revamp my image and posh up a fraction
 - 42) Get tattoo done saying "Courage over adversity"
 - 43) Hold a snake
 - 44) Conquer my fear of fairground rides (I came off one back in 1970s and was on the 9 O'Clock News!)
 - 45) Get over my fear of spiders by holding a Chilean rose tarantula
 - 46) Go Ape in Wendover and do a 120-foot zip fly drop
 - 47) Approach a 99p Store to have my collection boxes on all their tills
 - 48) Get recycled ink cartridge boxes for Brain Tumour Research into local print shops and schools to raise more funds
 - 49) Put on second fantastic fashion show, Leighton Buzzard v Linslade, a success taking £3,500
 - 50) Bare my bottom in a G-string on catwalk - may the ground open up!
 - 51) Sing Hazel O'Connor on karaoke for the first time to start fashion show, along with a dance routine
 - 52) Auction a random man from a local gym at the fashion show
 - 53) Do a professional nude photoshoot to get national coverage
- STILL TO DO: Simulated skydive/ Get brain tumour leaflets into all UK's GP surgeries/Link with Mensa/Get Lord Alan Sugar to do a charity Apprentice

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myView

By KEVIN O'NEILL, Consultant Neuro-Surgeon at Charing Cross Hospital

BRAIN tumours, very often deadly with the average survival time being less than a year, are on the increase (up two per cent annually). This could be linked to issues like radiation or mobile phone use. We simply don't know because the funding for the research isn't there.

The fact they are often misdiagnosed shouldn't come as a surprise – a GP is unlikely to come across more than one or two intrinsic brain tumours in their career and the symptoms often mirror other conditions. But if your condition is getting worse, always ask about a referral to a specialist and a scan. With the NHS scanning capacity now, it's not hard to pick them up and by the time extreme symptoms are observed it could well be too late. At Charing Cross Hospital we have a fast track scanning system but it is desperately under-funded.

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