

Gavin - London UK - Jan 2020

Age: 44

Diagnosis: Achalasia - type not assessed.

Treatment: Balloon Dilatations (2002)

What symptoms did you first experience, and when?

In common with several sufferers I've spoken to, my first symptom was waking up with what felt like a heart attack - a real hard, sudden, spasming pain in the left side of my chest. This was in 1999, very soon after my father had died of a heart attack, so I was understandably worried (incidentally, quite a few sufferers have also reported significant life events close to the initial onset of their symptoms). I went to hospital, who told me my heart was fine, but they didn't know what was causing the pain. This initial attack lasted most of a day, but remained unique for quite some time.

When did you inform your GP, and what was the outcome?

Around two years later, I began experiencing trouble swallowing food. It's perhaps more accurate to say I began *noticing* that I was having trouble - this condition creeps up on you. This came to a head while I was on holiday in Paris, eating the most wonderful steak in a rooftop restaurant, and became suddenly aware that I was going to be sick.

I visited my GP when I got home, and he was concerned enough by the relatively rapid onset and severity of my symptoms to refer me to a Gastroenterologist.

When and how were you diagnosed?

I was fortunate enough to have private health insurance at the time, so was fast-tracked through a gastroscopy and barium swallow the following week. They tried to do a manometry as well, but couldn't get the catheter down into my stomach. Put together, this all convinced the Gastroenterologist that Achalasia was the culprit.

What treatment was recommended to you?

This is an interesting question. Most of the people I've spoken to are recommended the treatment that their specialist specialises in, funnily enough! If you see a surgeon, it's a myotomy, while if you see a Gastroenterologist, it's dilatations. True to form, my guy skated over botox as useless, and told me there wasn't much surgical experience around the myotomy (which may have been true at that point). He put me down for a dilatation in a month or two, but that schedule was brought forward significantly as the barium swallow didn't fully drain into my stomach, instead setting as a pretty good plug over my LES and stopping anything else passing through at all! I was back in the hospital a couple of days later with a drip in my arm, and an "emergency" dilatation booked for the following morning. That wasn't much fun, but feeling the first sips of water slide straight down into my stomach afterwards definitely was! The effect of that first dilatation lasted a little over six weeks, when I was disheartened to feel the symptoms returning. I had a

second dilatation - with a bigger balloon - a couple of months later in 2002 and, touch wood, that's kept my symptoms manageable ever since.

How are you managing your symptoms post treatment?

I think I'm very fortunate, in that I'm basically able to eat whatever I like, perhaps excepting very doughy things like soft white bread, which wad together on the way down. I do need plenty of room-temperature water to be available while I'm eating, and generally get through one or two pints per meal - at least I don't get dehydrated! I'm careful not to eat too close to bed time, as I've had quite a few instances of shooting awake with some small food item trying to work its way into my lungs - not pleasant.

Lastly, I try to carry a bottle of water with me everywhere. I experience relatively infrequent chest spasms, which are quite debilitating, but which can usually be eased with the water.