

# Verina's Story

**Age:** 36

**Diagnosis:** Type 2 Achalasia

**Treatment:** POEM (per-oral endoscopic myotomy)



## What symptoms did you first experience, and when?

Back in early 2014, I woke up one night with agonizing stabbing pains in my chest and upper back. I was convinced I was having a heart attack. The intense pain lasted for around 20 minutes then subsided. These attacks started to occur around every 2 weeks at various times of the day with no apparent trigger. I also began to feel that food was getting 'stuck' when eating things such as almonds and oat biscuits. I even noticed that I couldn't swallow water and smoothies very quickly. I put the dysphagia down to anxiety as I was experiencing stress at work, but the chest pain was a mystery.

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

I didn't see my GP until February 2015 as I was convinced that the symptoms were due a combination of anxiety and indigestion. After explaining the extent of my swallowing issues, the GP fast tracked me for an endoscopy. The results came back normal but it was recommended in the notes that I be referred for an oesophageal manometry test. The recommendation was not followed up by my GP and I didn't pursue it as I felt as if I were wasting everyone's time.

## When and how were you diagnosed?

After returning to my GP a few months later, I was referred to a gastroenterologist at the John Radcliff Hospital. Following an abdominal ultrasound scan, which came back normal, I was diagnosed with a 'functional gut disorder'. However, by the time of my follow up appointment with the gastroenterologist in December 2015, I was experiencing severe dysphagia and regurgitation along with weight loss. The gastroenterologist, not being able to identify the cause of my symptoms, finally referred me for a manometry test.

The manometry was scheduled for March 2016. Poised for the test, I remember telling the doctor that I doubted I would be able to lie down and swallow food. The doctor reassured me that this would not be a problem; however, after just a few mouthfuls of water with the tube in place, she confirmed there was sufficient data to diagnose Achalasia.

## What treatment was recommended to you?

The gastroenterologist suggested that a laparoscopic Heller myotomy would be the best option given my age and Achalasia type, so I was referred to a bariatric surgeon at the John Radcliffe hospital. The surgeon advised during my consultation that, although he recommended the Heller myotomy, I wouldn't be a good candidate for a partial fundoplication given my history of IBS.

## What treatment did you decide to have, and where was it carried out?

I had researched POEM on the internet and noted that King's College hospital was the first centre to carry out the procedure. I contacted the consultant (Dr Bu Hayee) directly and, after liaising with my GP, received an appointment at their Achalasia clinic. I was informed that POEM is not currently performed with an anti-reflux procedure, so I would have to manage acid reflux with medication if need be. After weighing up the pros and cons, I decided to opt for POEM and had the procedure on 3 October 2016.

## How are you managing your symptoms post treatment?

Since POEM, I've had great relief from oesophageal spasms and the resulting chest pain. I rarely experience regurgitation but still deal with a degree of dysphagia. I control acid reflux with lifestyle changes (not eating 3 hours before bed, smaller meals, etc) and a low acid diet (as per the 'Acid Watchers Diet'). I have learnt through trial and error which foods are easier to swallow and can now at least drink water to move food along more quickly (not an option prior to POEM due to high oesophageal pressurisation). I acknowledge that no treatment option will eradicate all Achalasia symptoms, so self-management is key.