

'It was so painful when the rods in my back snapped'

Curvature of the spine, or scoliosis, can cause everything from severe back pain to breathing problems, as Julia McWatt discovered



MOST of us are likely to suffer with some form of back problem, but for the majority of us, it will be in the latter part of our lives.

But for those who are diagnosed with scoliosis, the pain and discomfort will usually start in early teenage years and it can be a lifelong battle to cope with the symptoms.

The condition, which causes the spine to curve and twist, can be extremely painful to sufferers and, in some severe cases, can lead to breathing difficulties as the rib cage moves as the body tries to compensate.

Julie Davies is one of those people who is battling with the problems that her scoliosis creates.

The 49-year-old from Tylorstown is plagued by the condition as the titanium rods that were placed in her back to help her have snapped for the second time.

Julie, a supermarket check-out assistant, was first diagnosed with scoliosis when she was just 15.

She said: "I had X-rays and they found I had a curve in my back. Over the years I have been back and forth to my doctor, but at the time they said they would not operate on children."

"They knew what it was when I was younger. My mother had been hemming a skirt and she told me to stand up straight, but I thought I was standing straight. They felt my hips and then took me to the doctor and he said straight away that it was scoliosis."

"They monitored me and then they said the spine had stopped moving. I was in my early 40s when I went back and found out they would operate on adults. I went back to my doctor and she looked at my back and she said they should have done something years ago."

"It has been getting worse over the years. At one point my spine had curved 70 degrees. I cannot say that it is really agonising, it's more like a dull ache that I have all the time. But I am self-conscious about it and it looks awful. I always have to wear baggy clothes to hide it and I try to hold

myself upright when I walk."

Julie first had two rods put in her back eight years ago, but they have since snapped twice, causing her great discomfort.

She said: "My rod has snapped again now. It's an ongoing problem. In work I used to be able to do heavy lifting but I cannot do any of that now as I am terrified it will snap the rods. It was really painful when they first snapped as it trapped a nerve. I take co-codamol that the doctor has prescribed for the pain."

Louise Cooke, an osteopath at Wellfield Osteopathic clinic in Cardiff, said that many sufferers of scoliosis were more concerned about the effect it had on their physical appearance rather than the pain.

She said: "Very few people actually have a straight back. The problem with scoliosis is that people are often very self-conscious and it is the cosmetic side of things that affects them more than the pain, especially for women as they may feel they have to cover their body up

"The condition can change your

body shape because your brain is always going to make your eyes look straight ahead so the rest of the spine will compensate. Then it will turn and take several vertebrae with it, which will all twist and that is how you get the curve off to one side.

"It's important to point out that if someone is developing scoliosis, especially if it does not run in the family, they should get an X-ray from the doctor.

"Treatment is a question of how bad the curve is and what they can do with surgery. They can now do more and more with surgery. They can also put a rod in your spine to make the back straight rather than having a terrible spinal curve.

"The problem is when a child or young teenager gets scoliosis, they are still growing. But they can now do more to help and can operate on children and can adjust treatment as a child is growing.

"As osteopaths, what we do is try to make sure part of the back is still moving, so they do not feel too much discomfort."

THE FACTS

- Scoliosis is a curvature of the spine which affects about 4% of the population.
- The condition may be present from birth, but the vast majority of cases have no known cause.
- Until recently the only treatment has been surgery - the operation was devised 30 years ago with the invention of the Harrington rod.
- It involves placing and securing two stainless steel rods either side of the spine. The spine is also fused into a straightened position.
- The Scoliosis SOS clinic was founded by Erika Maude, following her own treatment for scoliosis at the Quera Salva clinic in Spain.
- Since opening the Suffolk clinic, the treatment has evolved and it is the only centre in the world to offer ScolioGold, which is a hybrid of the best non-surgical scoliosis treatment techniques from around the globe.

■ Julie Davies was first diagnosed with scoliosis when she was just 15.

Picture: Richard Williams

'I found it difficult when no one explained what was going on'

Fifteen-year-old Laura Wood from Canton, Cardiff, had been very athletic with a passion for karate, until she was diagnosed with scoliosis at the age of 10.

Laura was desperate to get back to her karate competitions but the pain was so severe that she would often spend weekends in her bedroom.

She has to do half an hour of exercises each day which were designed especially for her by her therapist at the Scoliosis SOS clinic in Suffolk so that she can avoid spinal fusion surgery in the future.

She said: "Before treatment I had to give up karate and I couldn't always participate in PE. This was awful as I love being active. In some of my lessons I was really uncomfortable, I didn't know what to do with myself. This really affected my ability to concentrate.

"It was very frustrating when we realised that my scoliosis had been deteriorating at such a rapid rate. I know I am still young, but I found it difficult when no one explained to me what was going on with my back.

"Now my understanding is better and I know what I need to do so that I can avoid having my spine fused in the future."

Laura underwent a four-week intensive course at the clinic, which uses a combination of non-surgical treatments, including physiotherapy. She is one of a growing number of

■ Laura Wood

people looking into other methods of trying to reduce the symptoms of the condition without surgery.

■ For more information about the clinic and treatment, visit www.scoliosissos.com

