



facing up to
CANCER





EVERY OCTOBER, WE INVITE CELEBRITIES TO DON PINK TO PROMOTE BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH. THIS YEAR, WE ASKED FOUR OF OUR STARS – **TASMIN LUCIA KHAN, KAREN DAVID, GOLDY NOTAY & TASHA TAH** TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH REAL WOMEN LIVING WITH THE DISEASE. INTERVIEWS BY MONTAZ BEGUM-HOSSAIN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX PICHON



Tasmin meets Shaila

It was losing weight that made the lump in Shaila Rasania's, 53, breast more prominent. She tells ITV *Daybreak* news presenter Tasmin Lucia Khan, how her life has been shaping up since...

How did you discover that you had breast cancer?

After a routine blood test, I was told I had high cholesterol and was put on medication which made me lose weight. At size 10, I wasn't big, but I was busty and being slimmer made the lump on my breast stand out more. My mother had died from breast cancer two years earlier – hers was detected late and she died three months after diagnosis. When my cancer was confirmed my first thought was that I was going to die.

What treatment did you receive?

I had six doses of chemo every three weeks over a five-month period and 15 doses of radiotherapy administered Monday to Friday for three weeks. Radiotherapy is like a laser that burns your muscles in case there are cancer cells there – for those three weeks I suffered total exhaustion. I had to travel three hours each time back and forth to see the specialists, and seeing as they advise to stay out of the sun during treatment, it hardly helped it was an extremely hot summer!

What was the hardest part?

Having to live solely on banana custard! My fingers and toe nails were totally black but the most traumatic experience was losing my hair. I was so proud of my luscious long Madhuri Dixit locks, imagine how I felt when clumps started falling out, then one day in the shower – one drop of shampoo and it was all gone. I couldn't stop crying.

What immediate impact did the cancer have on your life?

My main concern about being on extended sick leave was the financial burden. I was on a stable salary, working in a bank, and had two sons to provide for. I had to weigh up my priorities – should I keep my job and have the stress of returning to work loom over me, or find a way of settling into a more fulfilling life? I opted for early

Worse than losing my luscious locks and having blackened nails was having to live solely on banana custard!



Hair: Bashir Sabar • (l) Make-up: Raj Dhillon • Outfit: Morgas • Bracelet: Oceanic Jewellers • Earrings: Necklace: Ring: Basia Zarzycka • (r) Make-up: Ambreen • Outfit: Hartran's • Jewellery: Kyles Collection

TASMIN'S VIEW

'80% of breast cancer occurs in women over 50 and knowing Shaila was in this age bracket made me feel really sad. She seemed so young; I couldn't believe she's been through so much yet can maintain such a positive outlook. I loved her honesty and style and hope I'll be as elegant as her when I reach 50! One of my closest friends currently has breast cancer and I've stood by her all the way – from going bra shopping post mastectomy to discussing wigs. But I've also seen the other side of cancer. Three years ago my aunt passed away from stomach cancer. Knowing she didn't have long left meant we were able to say goodbye to her properly and I was able to tell her how much I loved her. I used to visit her every evening, then one day my mum called and said I should get over there straight away. I was 20 minutes late, but I still had comfort from knowing I had spent a lot of time with her before she passed away. Meeting Shaila reminded me of her, and also of how important it is that we keep an eye on our own health, particularly our breasts.'

retirement and, now that I've been given the all clear, I've spent my time doing charity work, raising awareness of breast cancer in the Asian community.

What does that involve?

Three years ago I went along to the Asian Women's Breast Cancer Group (www.awbcg.co.uk) in Harrow and appreciated their support so much that I joined the community and am now the treasurer. We've gone from having six members to over 40; all of us Asian women who have or had breast cancer. We organise talks, nutrition sessions, yoga and do fundraising. I have also been selected to take part in Breast Cancer Care's annual fashion show as a catwalk model – it's the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me!

You're one of the lucky ones. How does it feel when you think back to what you went through four years ago?

That period was a different part of my life and I try not to think about it, instead I focus on the future. I am in remission which means I am okay for now, but of course I still have a fear that the cancer may come back. I take an oral form of chemotherapy which leaves me with stiff joints and dizzy spells and sometimes I wake up and can't focus. But I have learned to love myself and my hair again. I miss my long black locks but I'm not ashamed of my new look – it is part of my identity and it makes me proud.



Tasha meets Jasvinder

Jasvinder Rall, 47, became concerned after she noticed she had an inverted nipple. She opens up to singer Tasha Tah about how it felt to have her worst fears confirmed...

Is it true you had an inkling you might have cancer before the doctors?

I went for a smear test and I asked the nurse to also check my breasts after discovering one of them had become inverted. She said they were normal, as did the doctor, but to allay my fears, he referred me to the breast cancer screening unit. The mammogram revealed a cancerous lump and I was told if I didn't have it removed I would die within six months.

How do you cope with hearing something like that?

At first, you don't! I cried continuously for one whole week. I couldn't eat or even stand up. My husband knew, but I hid it from my daughter, who was only 12 at the time – what could I say to her?

Losing both your breasts must have been awful...

The double mastectomy operation was one of the hardest things I have ever been through. I felt I'd lost my identity and that my new body looked like a man's. But this was just the beginning – I had six sessions of chemotherapy and 25 sessions of radiotherapy to look forward to!

I take it you didn't take it very well!

Everyone reacts differently and I reacted very badly. Most people spend a day in hospital, but after each session, I'd be there for five days – I even spent a Christmas there! Losing my hair was horrible, but the high energy x-rays of radiotherapy left me black and blistered as though I'd been left to burn on a cooker.

How do you keep your spirits up?

I am still on anti-depressants and twice tried to take my own life. But, other than my family, my nurse Archna has been my rock. She suggested I attend a course run by 'Looking Good...Feeling Great' who run workshops for women recovering from cancer. They make you feel feminine again – I learned things like how to draw on realistic eyebrows. It gave me a real boost and has made me feel attractive again.

Does the future look bright?

I am strong now and not afraid of anything. I used to be scared of dying but now, when my times comes I am prepared for it. I'm back at work, feeling positive, and just enjoying living a normal life.

TASHA'S VIEW

'I couldn't stop crying during the shoot. How can someone so ordinary and so lovely have gone through so much? Jas was so funny and bubbly and reminded me of my mother. We look up to so many celebrities, but it's women like Jas who are the real heroines. Meeting women like her makes you realise that small issues in life don't matter, you should just let go and enjoy life, but at the same time, you want to tell the community, which likes to brush health matters under the carpet, to stop being close-minded. We should be having open discussions and educating each other about diseases, especially cancer. Six years ago my uncle had throat cancer – I saw him suffer through chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and I recently lost my father who suffered from several major illnesses. When people are that unwell, what they need is support, what they want is for us to treat them how we've always treated them. Imagine how you'd feel if it happened to you, and please have check-ups to ensure you don't.'

Goldy meets Nisha

Three years ago, Nisha Sidhu, 43, found what felt like a hard pea inside her breast. Here, she talks to *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* star Goldy Notay, about how she vowed to not let it stop her being a super mum...

With three children to care for it must have been devastating to discover you had cancer?

I found out on the day my daughter was getting her GCSE results, but I had to put it all aside and went to work as normal. I was mostly in shock – I don't drink, smoke or eat fried food – my wellbeing has always been a priority, so this was like a bomb that fell from nowhere.

Did you know it was life-threatening straight away?

I didn't think the lump was anything serious when I went in for my initial biopsy, which is where they insert a needle into your breast to extract cells to check if you have cancer, only to be told it was 'grade 3', an aggressive form of cancer, and mine was living off my oestrogen hormone.

What was the worst part?

Mentally, I was disappointed in myself. I always wanted to be a super mum and I tried to carry on that role even during my treatment. I would return from chemo sessions exhausted but try and make the kids their dinner even though they wanted me to stop and relax. I was lucky that removing just the lump was enough, I didn't need to lose a breast, but I still had to put up with the side effects of chemotherapy like hair loss, and having a constant taste of metal in my mouth.

What gave you strength?

Websites like Cancer Research, and going on the forums and talking to other people in my position. And of course, I wouldn't be here without my family. It's easy to forget how much suffering and feelings of helplessness they go through too. And things like this photoshoot help too – I can't remember the last time I felt feminine, let alone sexy!

How has your outlook on life changed?

I don't know what's normal anymore other than that a normal person is healthy and I'm not. I suffer from depression and am taking oral chemotherapy drugs for the next five years which have side effects like fatigue, weight gain, hot flushes and high blood pressure, not to mention lymphoedema. But my general attitude to life is that of the Bollywood movie *Kal Ho Naa Ho* – tomorrow may not be, and because of that, I take life as it comes.



GOLDY'S VIEW

'Nisha is still going through her cancer journey and her smile is her coping mechanism, but she also shows how happy she is to have survived and be here today. I was so moved to hear her talk about her experiences – I saw real hope in her eyes knowing she is making the most of every opportunity. I felt that the loss of confidence she spoke about was partly restored during our shoot, especially when she kept cracking Punjabi jokes!

But as light-hearted as we can try and be about such a serious affliction, there's no getting away from the fact that it is a life threatening disease. And one that I have come scarily close to myself.

Last year I went in for a routine smear test that came back indicating abnormal cells. My doctor explained that every six months your body readjusts so it could be part of that. I was advised to go back and have regular checks. It's hard to find time for appointments in my job where I'm constantly traveling for castings. Then last April, halfway through filming *It's a Wonderful Afterlife*, I had a test result which showed I had abnormal cells in my cervix. They would need to be removed immediately before they turned cancerous. My first thought was of Jade Goody, but my doctor assured me that while she hadn't been monitored, I was. My cells had been caught early, so I had nothing to worry about. This was easy for them to say – I couldn't

schedule in an operation during such a tight filming schedule. I couldn't tell anyone on the film set, partly because I was terrified I'd be dropped from the film, but mostly because I wasn't ready for sympathy or to be treated differently.

In the end, my agent talked to my producer and I was given two days leave for my operation. After any surgery it's essential to rest but I went straight back on set and no one suspected a thing. Although filming was exhausting, I needed a project to take my mind off what I had been through and to stop myself being haunted by having had death knocking on my door. In one scene in the film, my mother, played by Shabana Azmi, is diagnosed with cancer. I can't begin to tell you the turmoil that caused inside me.

If I hadn't gone to that check up, my life could have taken a very different route – in essence that test saved my life. Now I get checked every three months. Until now I haven't told anyone about my experience but meeting such inspirational women today gave me the strength to share my story. Even if just one Asiana reader books herself in for a smear test after reading this article, I'll feel I have done something positive. Don't be afraid of the 'c' word, educate yourself about it and be aware of the signs. There is life after cancer as these women so bravely prove.'

Karen meets Indira

You never think it'll happen to you in your 30s. Indira Jayasuriya, 33, tells singer and *Waterloo Road* star Karen David, why she thought wrong...

It must have been hard to accept you had breast cancer so young...

I went ice cold. I was convinced they must be wrong and talking about someone else. My husband on the other hand was inconsolable; he thought I was going to die.

How did you hold it together?

I was determined to stay positive and beat the disease – my friends were crying more than me. I was like: just saying pull yourself together, I'm still alive! But inside I still couldn't quite believe it was me. I presumed I was low risk – I'm a vegan and very sporty and had always been in good health. But it just shows you can never be too sure.

What was the worst part for you?

Being told that having cancer treatment may result in me not being able to have children. Becoming a mother is something I took for granted and I wasn't ready to have that option taken away from me. Before I started chemotherapy I had some of my eggs extracted and I now have nine frozen embryos waiting for me when I am ready.

How did you deal with having your breast removed?

Everything happened really fast. I had the mastectomy, followed by reconstruction surgery, creating a 'fake boob' in its place on the same day. I'm so glad I had that choice. Losing my breast and then going through chemo and radiotherapy drained my body so much that I didn't recognise myself. I couldn't have faced going into hospital again to have reconstruction at a later date. Following the surgery I had five sessions of chemotherapy and after just one dose, all the positive attitude I had went out of the window. My whole body was aching, I developed oral thrush and couldn't taste or swallow and was throwing up all the time. After each session I would lie in bed and think I was dying.

What gave you the strength to get through such difficult times?

I did it for my family. My mum and sister are both medics and insisted I had all the treatment. When I first discovered the lump I was reluctant to get it checked but my husband forced me, by saying if I love him I would get tested. Having him around gave me motivation – the biggest fear a



KAREN'S VIEW

'Meeting Indira was so inspiring. She has such a sunny disposition and was smiling throughout the shoot, even though she's been through so much. Listening to her talk about her experience had me in near-tears, through admiration rather than sympathy. I saw in her an inner sparkle that every day people just don't have. Having come so close to death, she really knows the meaning of life.'

I became an ambassador for Breast Cancer Care earlier this year as I believe it is so important to encourage Asian women to get tested. Two of my mum's best friends had breast cancer and I saw the hardship they went through within a society who still sees it as taboo. Breasts are nothing to be ashamed about, you must get yours checked regularly and if you notice any abnormality, no matter how small, go straight to your doctor. I'm looking forward to doing charity work for Breast Cancer Care over the next few months and am currently in training for a fun run. I want to encourage all women, no matter what your age to take breast cancer seriously. It's not the end, you can survive it and like Indira, you can start life again with an inner strength that you didn't know you had.'

The worst thing was being told the cancer treatment may result in me not being able to have children

woman has about losing a breast and her hair is that she'll no longer be attractive, so it's wonderful to have a man who still makes you feel desirable.

You don't seem bitter in the least bit!

I have a huge scar across my breast as a reminder of what I've been through and I have to take Tamoxifen, an oral hormonal chemotherapy drug, every day for the next five years. My outlook now is short term and I no longer dwell on things – instead I've learnt to prioritise. I now relish getting on the train on a Monday morning and going to work. You won't mistake me for an unhappy person because I really am not – I can't tell you how happy I am to be alive!

ASIANAIssues

Keep abreast of the facts

Each year 46,00 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer – that's equal to one in nine women developing breast cancer at some point in their lives. 4000 women are diagnosed every month, while another 1000 will die from the disease in that same month.

What causes breast cancer?

Every case is different and it's impossible to pinpoint why individuals get cancer. However, risks do increase if it already exists in your family, if you suffer from obesity, or if you use hormone replacement therapy and oral contraceptives. In most instances, having a healthy, active lifestyle can reduce the risk, although it is not uncommon for women who look after themselves to contract the cancer.

In the last decade the number of breast cancer diagnosis' in the UK has increased, but the good news is that more women are surviving it than ever before. Early detection is vital for this, but according to research by Breast Cancer Care, a shocking 43% of black and minority ethnic (BME) women admit to never looking at or feeling their breasts – 56% say this is because they don't know what to look for. Don't become part of this statistic, make sure you stay in control of your health:

How do I check my breasts?

There's no right or wrong way to check your breasts but it's important to get to know them so that you can immediately spot any irregularities. Keep an eye on all parts of your breast, your armpits and up to your collarbone.

What should I look and feel for?

- Changes in size and shape
- Changes in skin texture such as puckering or dimpling
- Inverted nipple

- A lump or thickening of breast tissue
- Redness or a rash on the skin or around the nipple
- Constant pain in breast or armpit
- Swelling in armpit/around collarbone

The 5 point code

1. Know what is normal for you
2. Know what to look for and feel for
3. Look and feel
4. Report any changes to your GP without delay
5. Attend routine breast screening if you are 50 or over – encourage relatives/friends in this bracket to do so.

HELP AND SUPPORT

Cancer Research UK

The world's leading charity is dedicated to beating cancer through research and is the UK's largest single funder of breast cancer research. It also provides information and advice for cancer patients and their families. To find out more about its breast cancer campaign 'Join the fight for women's survival', visit www.jointhefight.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care

Offers free, confidential support and information to anyone affected by breast cancer. This includes a helpline, informative website and online forums offering expert information and emotional and practical support. Log onto www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call the free helpline on 0808 800 6000.

Look Good... Feel Better

LGFB offers free skincare and make-up workshops in 59 UK hospitals to female cancer patients. The session, hosted by volunteer beauty consultants, help thousands of women to look and feel more like their 'normal' selves after losing their hair, eyebrows and confidence in a fun and interactive way. A DVD and booklet is also available. Visit www.lgfb.co.uk or call 01372 747500.

THINK PINK

Raise funds by hosting your own Pink Friday event

Don on your girlie outfit and pop open the pink champagne – it's time to get into the pink! October is Breast Cancer Awareness month and you can take part by raising money for Breast Cancer Care by holding your own Pink Friday event. Pink any Friday in October and get your friends and colleagues involved. You could host a pink tea party (with pink wafers and pink lemonade), wear a pink feather boa to school, college or work, organise a pink exchange or even a pampering night in with pink manicures and strawberry face masks. Everyone involved is asked to make a donation – for further details and advice to organise your Pink Friday event visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk/pinkfridays

Brita water filter jug, £25 (department stores)



Fuji film camera, £89.99, Boots

Sports bra, £6, Tesco

Mornflake muesli, £3.79, (most supermarkets)

Flake, 49p, Asda

BREAST BUYS!

This autumn the high street will be filled with fabulous pink products. A donation will be made to either Breast Cancer Care or Cancer Research for every item sold so get the girls together and head off on a spree. Shopping has never been so guilt free!

Square plates, £8 for set (www.pamperedchef.co.uk)

Bag for Life, £5, (www.breastcancercare.org.uk/shop)

Palmer's Cocoa Butter, £3.59, Boots



Next 'Breeze' vase and bouquet, £25 (www.next.co.uk)



Elemis, £50 (www.timetospa.co.uk)