

Look at us now!

Now she's lost weight, Helena is fitter, happier and more confident



Chronic health conditions destroyed Helena, Jean and Barbara's looks and self-esteem... but now they feel more attractive than ever



Helena's weight gain aged her

cycle, and stretch – and I've cut my insulin by half. My cholesterol is also down to 4.2 – unbelievably low for someone who was a high risk for heart disease. Best of all, I've lost 5st. I've had the confidence to get a modern haircut and wear trendier clothes. Many people say I look more like 27 than 37. I hope it will be many years before I look 47 again!

Need to know: Diabetes

More than two million people in the UK have diabetes – that's three per cent of the population. It's a condition in which the amount of sugar in the blood is too high because the body cannot use it properly. Diabetics are more likely to develop heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and circulation problems, plus damage to the kidneys, eyes and nerves – and those who are also overweight are more at risk. Although a symptom of diabetes is weight loss, insulin treatment combined with a high-GI diet can cause weight gain. Visit www.diabetes.org.uk. Xenical is available on prescription, or from a weight-loss programme run by Boots.

Diabetes made 37-year-old Helena Begley, from Leyland, Lancashire, pile on the pounds. Here, she reveals what finally improved her health and her figure

Two years ago I was 15½st and, when the picture above right was taken, I looked as if I was in my mid-40s – ten years older than I really was. I was so depressed about my appearance, I often felt as if I was crawling through life. I couldn't lose weight – every time I tried, I'd lose two pounds and gain four – and I couldn't exercise because it hurt. My

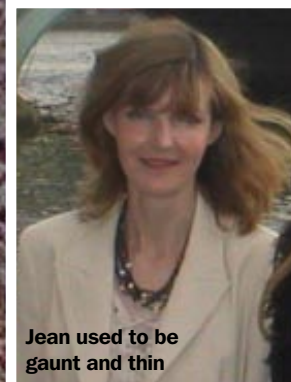
joints couldn't cope with the excess weight I was carrying, and I puffed and ached if I tried to go for a vigorous walk.

I've been diabetic (type one) since the age of 11, and my weight seemed to go up year after the diagnosis. I wasn't eating excessively – at least I didn't think I was – but the combination of diabetes and my diet turned out to be the root of the problem.

Finally, in September 2003, I asked my GP to help me lose weight. He put me in touch with a dietician, who pointed out that my diet was packed with very high-GI foods – processed cereals, lots of white bread, and

my sugar levels were completely out of control. I've had several diabetic comas in my life (the last one was 18 years ago), and was controlling my condition with insulin injections, but I needed to take far more than I would have had I been a healthy weight. The consultant agreed to let me take the weight-loss drug Xenical. I also had to swap fatty foods, such as butter and cheese, for low-fat alternatives, and switch from high-GI white bread and potatoes to low-GI wholemeal bread and basmati rice. But it wasn't too hard.

As the weight loss kicked in over the next year, I was able to start exercising – I now run,



Jean used to be gaunt and thin

Pain-free and at a healthier weight, Jean is living life to the full these days

Jean Heal, 47, from Warminster, Wiltshire, was heading for bowel surgery when she discovered the natural remedy that would keep her out of hospital – and put much-needed flesh on her bones

When the picture above right was taken, four years ago, I weighed barely more than 6st and, behind the smile, I was worrying about where the nearest loo was. I'd been suffering with Crohn's disease since my eldest daughter, Bekki, 19, was a baby. It was diagnosed after a year in which everything I ate seemed to go straight through me, and I was passing so much blood from ulcers in my colon that I was too weak to climb the stairs

without sitting down for five minutes at the top to recover.

For three years, Bekki and I were prisoners in our home. Not only did I lack the energy to go out, but I dreaded not

Not only did I lack the energy to go out, I dreaded not being able to reach a toilet fast enough if I needed one

being able to reach a toilet fast enough if I needed one. When I got pregnant with my second daughter, my symptoms subsided. Like many other

autoimmune conditions, where the body attacks itself, Crohn's goes into remission in pregnancy. But, the symptoms came back with a vengeance soon after Ashli, now 15, was born. Terrified of "accidents" if we were out, I started wearing huge pads, like nappies – and I

couldn't go to the supermarket without my husband, Richard, 52, in case I needed to run to the loo while at the checkout.

Eighteen months ago, things were so bad that my consultant wanted to take out a large part of my colon, and leave me with a colostomy bag instead. Desperate to find an alternative, I searched the Internet and came across an aloe vera remedy, Aloeride. It claimed to be able to reduce inflammation wherever it occurs, be it the skin (eczema), joints (arthritis), or the bowel (as in Crohn's). Supplements were said to work best alongside other treatments, such as a change in diet, and traditional medicines, too.

The change the Aloeride capsules made was astounding. By the third day, I had no

tummy pain (and I had lived with pain for nearly 20 years) and, within weeks, I was going to the loo less often, and gaining weight. The aloe vera in these capsules is so effective at fighting inflammation that if I ever burn myself while cooking, I break open a capsule and rub the oil in – and the redness fades instantly. When I next saw my doctor he agreed I no longer needed a colostomy, and an examination proved that my bowel was much healthier.

A year on, I've halved my medication, my weight has reached 8st, and I feel as if I'm on the brink of a new life. I've always dreamed of a career in social work, and now I feel ready to start a college course. Richard and the girls are as delighted with the new me as I am. I'm more independent, more energetic – and I look so much better, too!

Need to know: Crohn's disease

Up to 6000 new cases of Crohn's disease are diagnosed each year in the UK. The condition causes inflammation, deep ulcers and scarring of the small intestine and colon, and the main symptoms are urgent diarrhoea, general tiredness and weight loss. There's no cure for the disease, but most people take control of it with drugs, liquid feeds and surgery. Find out more about Crohn's disease at www.nacc.org.uk.

Aloeride costs £15.99 for two to four weeks' supply, from www.aloeride.co.uk.



After decades of misery, Barbara feels full of energy

Years of ill health left Barbara Reed, 55, from Morpeth, Northumberland, looking old before her time. Three years ago, she finally found the key to looking ten years younger

I've never been vain, but I remember being really shocked when I first saw the picture of myself above right, taken in 2001, when I was 50 years old – I looked so old and worn out. I'd been diagnosed with an under-active thyroid gland two years earlier but, despite being treated for the condition, I was feeling absolutely dreadful – sluggish and tired with the most awful brain fog, as if I was thinking through treacle.

My problems had started way back in 1983. After having my children, David, 26, and Caroline, 23, my periods had

become so irregular that, after Caroline's birth, there was just spotting. I also had mysterious muscular pains, sinus problems, I felt cold all the time, and was losing a lot of hair.

Now that I know all about thyroid disease, I'm sure these were early warning symptoms. But they were not recognised at the time, so I was given non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for years and was eventually diagnosed with post-viral syndrome in 1994, when I was 43. I didn't know it at the time, but many of the drugs I was given can affect thyroid function if you're vulnerable, and for years I suffered with low energy, aches and pains, and very dry skin.

At the school where I work as a technical assistant, I had to leave chairs in strategic places, so that wherever I worked,



At 50, Barbara felt worn out

I could sit instead of standing. While sewing, my fingers would seize up, and, after stapling papers at school or grating carrots at home, my arm would go into such a spasm that I couldn't use it for days. When Caroline was little, I even

had trouble pushing her buggy.

But whenever my thyroid function was tested, my results were always normal. This only began to make sense eight years ago, when I read that "normal" test results are meaningless if they do not take the individual into account. What is a normal thyroid reading for one person may not be normal for someone else.

My condition was finally diagnosed in 1999, when levels of my thyroid hormones had plummeted off the official "normal" scale. I was given the conventional thyroxine treatment (a synthetic form of the hormone I was missing) but, two years later, when the photo was taken, I was still having problems – and it was another year before I was referred to a specialist who recognised that my body was unable to use thyroxine properly.

The specialist gave me Armour, a treatment made from natural pig's thyroid, which is close in make-up to the human thyroid gland. It contains all the thyroid hormones humans need. Although it doesn't help everyone, it did help me, plus

I can get it on the NHS. After the first dose, I felt as if a light had been switched on in my head. I could think again and, over the following months, I lost weight, my dry skin cleared, and my puffy face and bloated stomach subsided. By 2004, I felt 100 per cent better. That old picture is a painful reminder of how bad things were – I'm just so relieved I found the energy to fight for the treatment I needed.

Need to know: Under-active thyroid

The thyroid gland affects metabolism. If it's not working at normal speed (hypothyroidism), it can cause lethargy, low libido, weight gain, coldness, dry skin, hair and nails, slow speech and a foggy brain. It can be triggered by poor diet, pollutants, or glandular fever, and can also be caused by autoimmune problems (the body starts attacking itself). Treatment is usually with a synthetic form of thyroxine (T4 for short), one of the hormones made by the thyroid gland or tri-iodo-thyronine (T3). Natural thyroid (Armour), the treatment Barbara used, contains both T3 and T4. Visit www.thyroiduk.org.

Health problems that harm our looks

- Inflammatory bowel conditions, such as Crohn's or colitis, affect food absorption and cause dramatic weight loss.
- An under-active thyroid causes dry skin and thinning hair.
- Anaemia causes thin hair.
- Food intolerance can cause problems, such as weight gain and bloating.
- Sensitivity to high-GI foods (eg with diabetes) contributes to weight gain.
- Mineral deficiencies cause brittle nails and dry hair.
- Polycystic ovary syndrome can cause acne and excessive hairiness.