

TV SPORTS HOST REVEALS

The shocking diagnosis that rocked my family

When Erin Molan's sister was diagnosed with bowel cancer, her reaction was disbelief, but as she tells **Sheree Mutton**, it's a disease that can strike at any age.

LIKE MOST MOTHERS diagnosed with cancer, it was the thought of leaving her two children that Sarah Sutton feared most. Just three months after giving birth to her son, Angus, the teacher and older sister to Nine Network sports presenter Erin Molan was told she had stage three bowel cancer. "It was a huge, huge shock," says Sarah, now 33. "I think I actually thought, 'No, I don't. This happens to other people. This is coeliac [disease] or Irritable Bowel Syndrome or Crohn's

disease. This isn't cancer – I have young kids. I've got a brand new baby'." There's never a good time to get cancer, but for Sarah it couldn't have hit at a worse time. She was enjoying life in Nyah, in regional Victoria, with husband Gavin, their daughter, Sophie, and new son Angus. They were a settled family and happy again following the devastating loss of their second daughter, Emily, who was stillborn. Sarah says there was a mixture of emotions, including denial and confusion following the diagnosis because she thought "we've had our rough patch, this is our time".

The signs of bowel cancer
Little did Sarah know, but while Angus was growing inside her, so was a series of polyps that would later be identified as bowel cancer. Sarah recalls experiencing a change in her bowel movements and feeling unwell in the second trimester of her pregnancy. "I wasn't putting on the weight I was expected to and I noticed the change in my bowel habits and feeling generally unsettled in the stomach,"

she says. "I let it go and put it down to the pregnancy. Not long after my son was born, the symptoms started getting quite a lot worse and it was actually my mum that pushed me to go and see a doctor." Just like Sarah, sister Erin, 31, also assumed it was a minor problem. "When Sarah first started having symptoms, we were saying, 'Just cut wheat out of your diet, darl, stop eating bread'," says Erin, adding that "people feel awkward talking about bowels and bowel movements". She says she always associated bowel cancer with older men. "I had no idea that bowel cancer could affect young women like Sarah." According to Associate Professor Graham Newstead, a colorectal surgeon and Director at Bowel Cancer Australia, this is one of the biggest misconceptions and challenges. "No one should be told they're too young to have bowel cancer," he says. "No one should assume that rectal bleeding is 'just haemorrhoids'. Investigations need to be carried out to confirm the underlying cause of the symptoms, regardless of age." >

Erin Molan (left) and Sarah Sutton can smile now Sarah has recovered.



Did you know?

One in 12 Australians will develop bowel cancer in their lifetime.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALANA LANDSBERRY. STYLING BY BIANCA LANE. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY NICOLA JOHNSON. SARAH WEARS ZARA DRESS. ERIN WEARS KAREN GEE DRESS. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHE.

SYMPTOMS OF BOWEL CANCER

- Blood in the stool.
- A recent, persistent change in bowel habits to looser, diarrhoea-like motions, going to the toilet more often or trying to go.
- Diarrhoea, constipation, or feeling that the bowel does not empty completely.
- Frequent gas pains, bloating, fullness or cramps.
- Stools that are narrower than usual.
- A lump or mass in your stomach.
- Weight loss for no known reason.
- Persistent, severe abdominal pain.
- Feeling very tired.
- Vomiting.

“If you’re experiencing these symptoms, it doesn’t mean you have bowel cancer; it does mean you need to see your GP, where you may be referred for further investigation.”

The treatment Sarah endured was tough: three major surgeries and months of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. “It took me two and a half years to get back to work,” says Sarah, who is now living cancer-free. Her message is simple – being young does not make you immune to bowel cancer, so get checked.

“If they catch it early enough, it’s completely survivable,” she says.

Life post-cancer

Following Sarah’s battle with bowel cancer, her two sisters, Erin and Felicity, and brother Michael were tested for the genetic mutation Sarah had inherited. Luckily, none of them carried it. Both Sarah and Erin now work with Bowel Cancer Australia as an advocate and ambassador respectively, helping to raise awareness about the importance of early detection.

Back at home in Nyah, Victoria, with Gavin and their two children, Sophie, now eight, and Angus, four, life has changed for Sarah, too. “I spend much more time when I’m at home actually being at home and not locking myself in the study and doing work,” she says. “I have an incredibly supportive family.”



It was around the time her son was born that Sarah (above, with husband Gavin, daughter Sophie and baby Angus) felt something was wrong. Left: Erin and Sarah, now cancer-free.

Rates rising in young people

Every year, about 15,000 Australians are diagnosed with bowel cancer and, of those, 1000 are under the age of 50. Associate Professor Newstead says the rates are increasing among this age group. Research published in the *Journal Of Gastroenterology* showed that between 1990 and 2010, bowel cancer rates doubled in Australians aged 20-29 years and went up by 35 per cent in 30-39-year-olds. He says researchers are still trying to identify why this is, but points out that high-fat food prepared outside the home, increasing obesity, sedentary lifestyles and early diabetes are all possible risk factors.

It’s our country’s second biggest cancer killer, yet one in five people with symptoms delay going to the doctor. “Some people hope that the symptoms will disappear if they wait long enough, some don’t think the symptoms are anything sinister, so don’t seek medical advice, and there are others who don’t want to know the cause of their symptoms – they’re fearful of receiving a cancer diagnosis,” he says.

Currently, bowel cancer patients have a five-year survival rate of 66 per cent, compared with breast and prostate cancers, which have survival rates of about 90 per cent. In the future, Associate Professor

Newstead hopes the awareness of bowel cancer will increase, along with funding and research. “Women chat about mammograms and the guys are starting to talk about getting their prostate checked. We’ve all got bowels and life can become very difficult when they’re compromised, so get the bowel conversation going, too.” ■

For more information on bowel cancer, visit bowelcancerawarenessmonth.org.

GET CHECKED

If you have a family history of bowel cancer or are aged over 50, you should take the screening test known as faecal immunochemical test (FIT) every one to two years. In the year you turn 50, 55, 60 or 65, the government will send you a free screening test kit by mail, but they can be purchased through the BowelScreen Australia Program from your GP or community pharmacies in the intervening years. The FIT test is not 100 per cent accurate, so if you’re experiencing symptoms, see your GP immediately. They will most likely refer you to a specialist for a colonoscopy.



WATCH OUR VIDEO

To hear more of Sarah and Erin’s story, download the **viewa** app (see Contents) and scan this page with your smartphone or tablet.