



Amy wasn't spineless when it came to her back...

I'd been looking forward to the school skiing trip to Austria for as long as I could remember. And now I was having a great time. But souvenir shopping one evening, I was suddenly crippled by searing stabbing pains on my right side.

"Aunty, I've got something to cope with the discomfort. You should sit down," said my worried teachers, leading me to a café.

"Down," I groaned as another job of pain tore through me. I was freezing, even though it was a warm day in February 2007, so my friends placed their ski jackets over me to warm me up, while my teacher rang my dad, Dave.

"Amy's poorly," he said. "Do you want us to take her to hospital?" He agreed, and soon me and a teacher were on the way to hospital in the school coach. Tears pricked at my eyes. I was only 11, and fell scared and alone. "What was wrong with me?" When an ultrasound scan didn't show up any problems, I was relieved. Maybe I was just having growing pains.

But the following morning, when the doctor placed his fingers on my right side, I cried out in pain. "It's your appendix," he said. Further tests revealed my appendix had probably ruptured. Not only that, a bacterial infection had also caused an inflammation of the peritoneum,

the membrane that lines the stomach wall.

It was serious – and my appendix had to be removed immediately.

I tried to stay strong as I was wheeled into theatre, but I was terrified. I'd never been under anaesthetic before.

I awoke my mum... When I woke up two hours later the doctor said the operation had been successful. Better still, Dad and my mum, Caroline, were flying over to see me.

"Thank God you're here," I sobbed when they appeared at my bedside.

Two days later, Mum helped me bathe in the hospital showers.

"That looks strange," she said, pointing at a sort of sticky-out bit under the skin below my left breast. "Is it a rib that's slightly out of place or something?"

I moved my hand to where she was looking. I'd noticed it before when I was dressing, but hadn't thought that much of it.

"It's always been like that," I said dismissively.

I just wanted to get out of the hospital and go home.

A week after my op, Mum and Dad took me back to our home in Tormarton, Gloucestershire.

I was so happy to be back and to see all my friends again, even though I was signed off school for three weeks to recover.

Mum wouldn't stop fretting about the sticky-out bit in my back, though. So, we went to see our local GP.

"I think we'd better refer you to a specialist," he said. "It involves straightening your spine by inserting metal rods into it."

"Will it be able to ride horses?" I asked.

"That was one of my main concerns..." Mum and Dad loved

My heart hammered as I looked at the scans that he'd pinched to the screen. My God – my spine looked really curved. It was like there was a letter 'S' inside my

back. Was that normal?

"You have a condition called scoliosis," the consultant explained. "It means that there is an S-shaped curve in your spine. A normal spine would feature a slight curve, anything up to 10 degrees, whereas the curve in your spine is 53 degrees. Your spine is twisted – that's why your rib is sticking out."

Terrified, I gripped Mum's hand. What did this mean?

"Stay calm, sweetheart," she soothed. "We'll sort it out."

The consultant talked through what might happen next.

In some cases, scoliosis mighted itself in others, it grows progressively worse, and the curve in the spine bends further and further. In the worst cases, it could even crush a sufferer's lungs, causing severe breathing problems.

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FULL OF BOUNCE

riding, and I'd first gone on a pony when I was just six months old, in a baby basket attached to the saddle.

Since then, riding had become my passion. I'd grown up with a Shetland pony called Fitzie. And in my teens, we used to go to Pembrokehire and ride along the beaches.

"... he was my first-ever pony

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Exercise straightened my spine



WE GOT BALLS!



● My spine when I was diagnosed with scoliosis



● How my spine looked a year after the treatment

My two dreams in life were to be a graphic designer and to own a horse. Had my spine put an end to that?

The consultant frowned. The danger with having this operation and then horse riding is that, if you fall off, the rods won't remain rigid, your spine might, he said gravely.

"I don't want the operation, then," I said, firmly. "I'd rather take my chances."

"There's no hurry," the consultant replied. "You don't have to decide now. It could be that your condition starts to improve anyway."

Over the coming weeks and months, me and my parents discussed the options at length. Meanwhile, I hid my figure under baggy T-shirts and jumpers. Soggy, really – it wasn't as if anyone else would notice the sticky-out rib. But now that my condition had a name, I felt self-conscious.

"You should do what you feel buggo with," my best friend, Tom Leach, smiled.

Tom was a year older than me and we'd met at school when I was 14. He was very patient and would happily listen to me fret about my scoliosis for hours.

Then, one morning in January 2008, a friend of Mum's rang. She'd seen a place that treated people with scoliosis, without

surgery, on GMTV. "It could be just the thing," Mum said excitedly, looking up at the clinic on the Internet.

Mum and me stared at the screen as the website for the Scoliosis SOS clinic in Suffolk popped up.

Scoliosis SOS is the first clinic in the world to offer non-surgical treatment for scoliosis and other spinal deformities, we read.

There were also photos of patients taking part in the clinic's exercise programmes.

"Beencing around on an exercise ball doesn't look half as bad as having metal rods inserted into my spine," I gaped.

Could this be the answer to my problems? We booked up for a free consultation and travelled from Bristol to Suffolk to meet one of the clinic's specialists.

"What do you think?" Mum asked me afterwards.

"I want to go for it," I replied. It sounded straightforward enough – doing stretches, exercises using balls and bars to straighten the spine. In fact, after all the worry I'd done over my scoliosis, it sounded too good to be true! The only drawback was that we had to pay for it.

"Let's do it any way," Mum said. "We'll find the money! It's worth

every penny if it means you can carry on horse riding."

So, in July 2008, Mum and me stayed in a B&B in Martlesham, Suffolk, for a month, and I went to the clinic every day from 9am until 5pm.

The first day was exhausting. The exercises weren't complicated, but they were very tiring.

I had to hang from a set of wall bars to stretch my spine, then do push-ups on the bars, and then hold the bars while I bounced on an exercise ball.

I was using muscles I hadn't even known existed! It was so wretched that, afterwards, I had to flop down on my bed and sleep for an hour before dinner.

As well as doing exercises, I was taught how to maintain good posture – essential if you have scoliosis – and how to breathe more air into my lungs, despite the curve in my back.

"I really think it's working," I told Tom, when he visited half through my treatment.

He was more than just a friend now – he was my boyfriend!

"That's great, Amy," he grinned. "By the time I went home at the end of July, tests showed the curve in my spine had reduced from 53 to 47 degrees. And my lung capacity had increased."

I was taking I in 18 litres more air a day than I had been before the treatment. I was thrilled!

A year on, I still do my exercises in the kitchen for half an hour every day, and my back is feeling stronger than ever. The curve is improving all the time and I'm not suffering any pain or feeling much fitter than I have done in years.

I still have a sticky-out rib, but I'm not self-conscious about it any more. I'm now going to show off my figure in T-shirts and vest tops.

What a pain!

Riding in Wales after the operation



BACK IN THE SADDLE!

Best of all, though, I haven't had to give up my beloved horse riding.

Last September, to celebrate my successful treatment, my parents took me on a dream holiday, horse riding in Colorado, USA. Galloping through the mountains and valleys was amazing.

"Thank you so much," I sobbed to Mum as we were home. This has been the best holiday of my life. And if it wasn't for you and Dad paying for that treatment, I'd never have been able to enjoy it."

To think that my new lease of life is down to an exercise ball and some metal bars fitted to the kitchen wall is incredible. Balls to back pain, in all I can say!

Amy Hewson, 17, Tormarton, Bristol

● A spokesperson for the Scoliosis SOS clinic told Real People: "The likelihood is that, had Amy not had the treatment, her scoliosis could have worsened every year. Her lung capacity could have been diminished and she could have suffered with ever-worsening back pain. We're so pleased that we were able to treat her and that she can carry on enjoying her passion for horse riding."

● For more information, visit www.scoliosisos.com

As told to Jane Common and Lucy Laine (features@realpeoplemagazine.co.uk)

