

'Vaginal mesh' left us in agony'

Two women who've had the medical procedure that's caused untold suffering tell **new!** how it ruined their health, too...

A hassle-free 20-minute operation. That's what the 10,000 women in the UK who are fitted with vaginal mesh devices to fix stress incontinence and prolapse every year are promised.

But last month, the BBC's *Panorama* revealed the plastic



Chrissey died from sepsis after having a mesh fitted in 2013

mesh fitted into millions of women globally over the past 20 years could be far riskier than it was made out to be.

Complications reported by thousands of patients include chronic pain, immunity issues and organ damage. In November, Chrissey Brajic from Toronto, Canada, died aged 42 from

sepsis triggered by a mesh device fitted for incontinence following childbirth. And last month, New Zealand banned the use of mesh devices in all operations until they are declared safe. Here, **new!** speaks to two women gravely affected by the implant...



Bladder
Mesh sling
Sling is placed behind the pubic bone
Urethra lifted by sling into proper position

'IT FELT LIKE I'D BEEN KICKED IN MY PRIVATES'

Paula Lynne, 38, a civil servant from Belfast, is mum to Dylan, 20, and Morgan, 14. She had a mesh sling fitted in 2011 after battling incontinence for years, but now suffers countless side effects...

Every morning it's a struggle. Making the short journey to the bathroom before being helped into the shower by my daughter Morgan, 14, leaves me in agony.

"Don't worry, Mum," she says to me. "I'll tidy up, you just rest."

She's had to grow up fast, as has my son Dylan. As a single mum, I've had no choice but to rely on their help.

The bladder problems I'd had all my life escalated when I had Dylan in 1997. I put up with the constant leaking, but wearing Tena Lady pants left me feeling embarrassed. They felt like nappies.

I had an elective C-section when I had Morgan in 2003, but the leaks continued. After splitting from my partner a year later, I lost all my confidence, gained weight and couldn't even contemplate dating.

I tried various treatments – pelvic physio and acupuncture – but nothing worked. The mesh sling was sold as "the Holy Grail" – no more leaks and it would take just 20 minutes.

In 2011, as I was being wheeled in for the operation, which involved fitting a mesh sling under my urethra to support my bladder, I pictured myself hitting the gym and doing star jumps soon afterwards.

But when I woke up from the anaesthetic my legs felt numb. When the feeling returned, the pain set in.

It radiated up my legs to my tummy, pelvis, bladder, vagina and lower back. I had permanent period-like pain and felt like a horse had kicked me hard in my nether regions. I was told the pain should subside, but it didn't.

It was six months before I could return to work, when it should have been weeks. No doctor made the connection between the op and my symptoms. But the pain worsened and soon I felt exhausted all day.

Eventually, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia – a condition which causes widespread pain and IBS.

I'd struggle to get into work at my local council and just getting up from my desk would make me wince in agony. Eventually, I was permanently signed off.

I couldn't cook or clean and holding a saucepan or picking up the vacuum cleaner would leave me shattered and needing a nap. I walked with a limp and couldn't sit or stand for long periods.

I missed so many years of quality family life, spending a lot of time recuperating in bed, not playing with the kids. The guilt I felt was enormous.

I had no social life and sex was so painful, I only attempted it twice. But I went on blaming my fibromyalgia.

That was until February this year, when I caught a news report on mesh implants – and heard that thousands of women had



She's waiting to have the mesh removed



Paula feels she's missed out on quality family time

experienced symptoms exactly the same as mine. "That's me," I sobbed. Doctors have since confirmed the mesh is the root cause of my issues. When I

was physically examined, I nearly flew out of my chair in agony as the doctor put pressure on the area where the mesh is located.

Unfortunately, there are no surgeons in Northern Ireland trained to carry out a removal so I'm now being referred to a hospital in London to see a specialist, but I'm on a waiting list.

For now, I rely on a cocktail of 11 painkillers a day and struggle with panic attacks and depression. I feel betrayed. To hear that women like Chrissey have died from complications is so frightening. We were sold this procedure as painless and simple – for me, it's been anything but.

'MY MESH LACERATED MY HUSBAND'S PENIS'

Mum-of-three Candia McCullough, 43, is married to Ian, 49, a business analyst, and lives in Rugby, Warwickshire. She had mesh slings fitted unknowingly while undergoing a hysterectomy in France in 2008 and has been left in agony...

"I've fixed your prolapse," said the surgeon when I awoke, groggy from anaesthetic, following my hysterectomy in 2008. I didn't even know I had a prolapse, but in the hospital in Paris where I lived at the time, I assumed the doctor knew best.

Straight away, the pain was unbearable. It started in my bowel area, then radiated to my spine, legs, vagina and bladder.

At first I assumed it was fallout from the operation, which I'd needed to have to deal with heavy periods. But as the months went by, it didn't improve.

My vagina and bladder would feel like they were doused with acid. I couldn't go to the loo without great difficulty and I kept getting urine infections.

When I walked and sat down, I would feel a pain like a knife slicing through my private parts. The few times my husband Ian, now 48, and I tried to be intimate, I would experience labour-like pains for weeks afterwards.

Once, he had lacerations on the end of his penis when he pulled out of me.

"There's something sharp in there!" I'd say, confused.

I went back and forth to the surgeon, but he blamed it all on

the hysterectomy, saying nothing about the prolapse operation he'd spoken of. In fact, he denied all knowledge of it.

Six months later, I was bed-bound and dosed up on painkillers. I went back to the UK, as Ian and I just couldn't go on. But of course, the problems came with me. I relied on a wheelchair and developed sleep apnoea. Eventually, doctors put it down to fibromyalgia.

Six months later, the kids moved back with me, but Ian stayed in France. I just couldn't be a burden to him, even though he was desperate to stay together.

In 2010, I had spine surgery because my back was so weak when it had been fine before. The years went by and I resigned myself to the fact that I was disabled.

But in January 2014, after a small prang in my car, I felt something sharp cutting through my rectum. I've never felt pain like it.

After that, I was in agony. I was living breath to breath, heartbeat to heartbeat. Ian, who I'd stayed in touch with, finally moved back in with me. We still loved each other and he just couldn't see me go through it alone.

Feeling certain there was



The insertion of mesh slings has left Candia with long-term health problems



She describes Ian as her "rock"

something stuck inside me, I took photos of the area to check if something was visible. It always looked angry and inflamed. Then one day, I spotted something sharp sticking out, like a piece of plastic.

A gynaecologist examined me and they could see the mesh. With every single touch, I felt like my insides were being grated.

Eventually, an MRI revealed mesh on my sacral joint, between my bowel and vagina, the neck of my bladder and on my tummy, too. Why the surgeon wouldn't admit it previously, I will never understand.

I now have the surgical notes to prove I had mesh slings fitted,

even though I had written on my consent forms that I have an allergy to certain plastics.

I am now on a waiting list for a full removal, but the damage has been done. I am physically injured as the devices have been there for nearly ten years, and my symptoms continue.

I have since set up the Mesh UK support group on Facebook to help other victims. Campaigning gets me through.

Ian and my kids have been my rocks. Without them I'd never have got through these dark days. One day, I will consider taking legal action.

Charlotte North

Visit Mesh UK on Facebook or Slingthemesh.wordpress.com

'THOSE WHO HAD COMPLICATIONS HAVE SUFFERED'

Ellis Downes, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist based in London, tells **new!** why non-surgical devices may be a better option...

"A majority of women who have mesh fitted don't experience problems, but those who experienced complications have suffered. The medical device industry

has largely withdrawn mesh products in the treatment of uterine-vaginal prolapse but it is still used on the NHS.

"Pelvic floor exercises may help, but the vSculpt device launched last year, which is non-surgical, is a viable alternative. It vibrates to increase pelvic tone, releases an LED light and heats up to increase blood flow and has been successful in clinical trials."



Ethicon, the company which produces the mesh implants, told the BBC's *Panorama*, "While we empathise with those who have experienced complications, the vast majority of women with pelvic mesh see an improvement in their day-to-day lives. All surgical pelvic floor procedures – with and without mesh – come with the risk of developing complications."