



**'I'm
fighting
cancer, but
I've never
loved my
body more
than I do
now'**

NHS statistics suggest half of all people will develop some form of cancer in their lifetime. Radio 1 DJ **Adele Roberts**, 43, is one of them, diagnosed with bowel cancer in October 2021. Here, she shares her blueprint for hope and why she believes we need role models for illness, not just wellness

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BRA: GAFFIT; JACKET:
ADIDAS; SHORTS:
THIRTYEIGHT; SOCKS:
BOMERAS; TRAINERS:
REEBOK; CLASSIC BOW
CLYDE; EARPLUGS: AGEST;
OWN (THROUGHOUT);
NECKLACE: MONICA
VINADER; RINGS: PIER
OWN (THROUGHOUT)

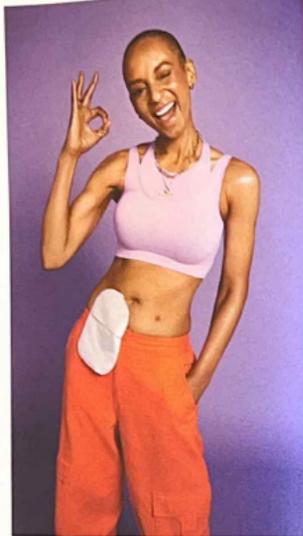
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earing radio presenter Adele Roberts summing up her current stance on life, as we wrap up our interview, feels like the best place to begin this story. 'I feel like your energy goes where your focus is,' she says simply, then excitedly confirms that she's paraphrasing *Energy*, the absolute banger by dance music duo Disclosure. For the uninitiated, the song is all drums, beats and whistles with spoken vocals in the vein of Mr Motivator. ('If you are alive, I know you ain't reach your best yet / You got more, you could do more / You could see more, you could be more, all right? / ... Where your focus goes, your energy flows.') 'You got me!' Adele laughs. 'I tried not to do the lyrics... I love that tune. And it's so true: where you put your focus is what manifests in life.' Which speaks directly to the full-throttle, high-octane positivity that Adele considers to be her most powerful weapon in the current battle between her body and bowel cancer.

When we speak, Adele is halfway through nine rounds of chemotherapy targeting the cancer her oncologist says has been growing in her bowel for a decade. Before starting chemo, she had an ileostomy operation to reroute her small intestine so that her waste enters her bowel entirely and instead passes through a small opening (called a stoma) in her stomach into an external bag, which she's named Audrey and drawn a rather fetching smiley face on. Together with her long-term partner, actress and writer Kate Holderness, she's on a mission. Well, three, actually.

Adele is determined to heal. She's also determined to show her audience that bowel cancer can affect young and healthy women. And, thirdly, she's determined to give people hope that it's possible

to enjoy a good quality of life while undergoing cancer treatment. On BBC Radio 1, via her own social media channel and blog, and through appearances on daytime TV, Adele has become a visible and vocal advocate for people with cancer and people with stomas. 'One in two of us will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lives, and I think the more we can actually talk about it, the less negatively affected people will be, mentally, if and when that happens,' she shares. 'That's why it means so much – as someone undergoing cancer treatment and with a visible stoma – to be on the cover of *Women's Health*.'



Good influence

Adele's own diagnosis came last October. It was a shock, not least because Adele knew that she was in good health generally: a nearly vegetarian marathon runner who would listen to podcasts about psychological self-determination. Someone who – as stated by

her GP when Adele initially reported increased bloating and blood in her stool – wasn't old enough to develop bowel cancer. ('She thought I had piles, but I'm so glad that she referred me for a colonoscopy!')

The days after her diagnosis were a blur. 'We had to wait a week to see how severe the cancer was going to be; I found it so hard to sleep,' she recalls. Kate spent the week googling the condition.

Fortunately, test results showed the cancer hadn't spread from Adele's bowel to her liver; it was stage two. She was booked in for an operation to remove the lower part of the bowel and create the stoma, and a treatment plan for chemotherapy was put in place. 'Following people on social media who were going through treatment and sharing their stories really helped me. People who were living their life – truly living with cancer,' she shares. 'And that wasn't



Adele Roberts

* OPPOSITE BRA AND TROUSERS, BOTH H&M; T-BAG NECKLACE, RACHEL JACKSON; GLOVES, CALVIN NECKLACE, ABBOTT LYON; THIS PAGE: TOP AND SHORTS, BOTH H&M; JACKET, H&M

something I'd really seen before my diagnosis. On TV, stories often portray the sad side of cancer, which definitely exists. But I didn't realise how much I'd still be able to do. I can go running, I can swim, I can still do my show on Radio 1.' Making the most of every moment is Adele's MO. She's all about forward motion, fuelled by self-help, buoyed by a supportive partner and work colleagues – not to mention a thriving and growing community of people online with whom she'll share playful posts and authentic insights into life with the UK's second deadliest type of cancer.

Mind power

I put it to Adele that what makes her journey so compelling to watch is how bulletproof her positivity seems. Does she allow herself to feel the fear, the sadness, the anger that's so often felt in response to a cancer diagnosis? She pauses. 'I've spent a lot of time being upset. When I was in hospital, recovering after my surgeries, I would overhear conversations of other women on the ward and learn they had a much worse diagnosis than me – maybe terminal cancer – and that's when I'd feel down,' she says. Perhaps others' tragedies allow a release for the sadness that's built up around her own condition – she spent a whole day in bed the day the story broke about music entrepreneur Jamal Edwards' death. 'I think my strategy, so that I can stay stable while I'm on chemotherapy, is just to get on with it and try not to let it beat me mentally. Like, I need to sort of tackle it head on, because that's how I cope with things, but I understand everyone's different.' One day she might turn to *The Daily Stoic* podcast, another she finds purpose in helping others by sharing her experience online.

What's particularly striking about Adele's journey is the effect bowel cancer has had on the way she feels about her body. Midway through her chemotherapy, missing half her digestive system and waking up around three times a night to empty her ileostomy bag (apologies, *Audrey*), our cover star insists she loves her body more than ever. 'Being diagnosed with cancer has meant I've learned to appreciate my body; be grateful that it works; be grateful they found the tumour in time to remove it and be grateful [that

Bowel cancer: the facts

It's the fourth most common cancer in the UK and the second most deadly. Here's what you need to know, from symptoms to treatment, by Bowel Cancer UK

What is bowel cancer? It's a general term used to describe cancer that starts in the large bowel (your colon) or back passage (your rectum).

How many people does it affect? There are nearly 43,000 new bowel cancer cases per year – one in 18 women will be diagnosed with bowel cancer in their lifetime.

What are the symptoms? A persistent change in bowel habits; blood in your stool; abdominal pain; discomfort; bloating; unexplained weight loss; extreme tiredness.

What, that sounds like BS? Yes, the majority of people with these symptoms don't have bowel cancer. Symptoms may be caused by irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease or haemorrhoids.

When should you see a GP? While NHS advice is to see

your GP after three weeks of symptoms, Bowel Cancer UK recommends going as early as you notice any symptoms. That's because bowel cancer is treatable and curable, especially if diagnosed early. Record symptoms in a diary. **What happens?** Your GP will ask you questions, examine your stomach area for lumps or tenderness, or do a rectal examination to feel for lumps. They may then refer you for a colonoscopy or a faecal immunochemical test to check for hidden blood in your stool.

How is bowel cancer treated? It depends on the tumour's size, positioning and how it has spread, but it generally involves surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy or a combination. Not everyone will need a stoma after surgery, and not everyone with one will need it forever.

modern medicine means I can] have a stoma," she shares. "I feel like I love my body more than ever." This is a truly admirable, noble attitude, and one that perhaps makes more sense when you consider what Adele – and her body – has been through over the years.

Growing pains

Born and raised in Southport, near Liverpool, Adele struggled with her physical form, never feeling that she matched the "typical sort of feminine girl" ideal. She was bisexual, she loved sport and house music; she wanted to be a DJ. When she turned 20, the death of her much-loved aunt – a keen bodybuilder – saw Adele try her hand at the sport, which she navigated alongside her studies, stints on student radio and glass-collecting shifts in nightclubs (convincing the DJ to let her loose on the decks after the lights came on). "I couldn't believe the transformation, that my body could look like that," she says of the satisfaction that came from growing her body stronger and more defined.

Then in 2002, when she was 23, came the third series of *Big Brother*. "I didn't do it to get famous; I did it for an experience. And, luckily, the fact I could DJ before I went on the show meant that appearing on the show gave me an opportunity to explore that avenue." But the platform-amplifying exposure came at a cost: appearing on television dealt a hammer blow to Adele's body image. "In those days, [the production team] used to give you a pack of all the really bad headlines that had been written about you just



BAR, ALLI FENN; TROUSERS, PENELOPE; TRAINERS, ADELE'S OWN; BRACELET, ABBOTTLYN

so you could read them all in one go," she says, grimacing. "There were people saying I walked "like a big tortilla" as I was "big and bulky"; another next to a picture of me said "Big Sister" instead of "Big Brother". I remember thinking, why would someone write that? Overt racism, check; sexism, check.

While Adele's attitude was tough-girl breeziness, these comments made her turn on her body. "I tried to destroy it," she says, of this muscular version of herself. "Subconsciously, I wanted it to go away, so I covered it up with food." She'd go as far as to say that she was dissociated from her body. "I think that's why I didn't want to do telly [after *Big Brother*]. Radio is very intimate and it's such a privilege to do radio, but one of the big things was that I didn't have to be in vision."

Physical therapy

For the decade and a half after 2002's *Big Brother*, life was, in many ways, good for our cover star. She steadily built a successful career doing what she loves. She also met the love of her life, in 2004, when Kate came to the radio station where Adele was working. "I remember seeing her and just thinking she was beautiful, but I didn't know she was gay; then she mentioned that she was going on a date with a woman and that was it," she laughs, "she couldn't get rid of me!" But she had neither love nor respect for her body, navigating a frenetic DJ lifestyle, chaotic sleep patterns and poor nutrition. "I spent a lot of my adult life overweight," she shares. It was only in 2015, when she landed the *Early Breakfast* show on Radio 1, that she chose to turn things around. "I had to get up at 2am, so I had to stop [with the poor health habits]," she says. "I had to be able to eat a more balanced diet, with plenty of fresh vegetables, legumes, grains and whole foods – and learning to cook. Then she signed up for the 2017 London Marathon and took herself

from couch to, erm, 42.2km during her training. Running continues to be a huge part of what helps Adele feel well and wholly herself. It was during marathon training, when she got bored of running playlists, that Adele began to listen to podcasts and audiobooks – and her fascination with the power of mindset began. The main reason I run is for mental health reasons – it does so much for me. It's like a release," she shares. "You know how you were saying before about being positive all the time? When I run, that's when it's like I get all the negative energy out of my body! She says it's not like the family dog! She says I need to get out the house every day for my walk or my run."

ADELE AND HER LONG-TERM PARTNER KATE HOLDERNESS, WHO SHE MET IN 2004



Power of you

Running, connecting with others, focusing on the positive. Adele's recipe for staying strong as she battles cancer is a powerful one. But there's another crucial part: relinquishing self-blame. "The first questions I asked when I was diagnosed were, "Am I going to die?" and, "Is it my fault?," Adele reveals. "I thought it was because of my bad eating habits;

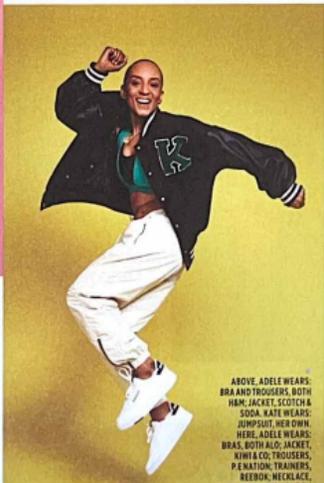
I thought it was because of my lack of sleep; I thought it was because of my lack of self-care; I thought it was because of eating too much processed food [earlier on in my life]. Then I thought, "Oh, is it because

"Cancer is the great leveller – it can affect any of us at any given time and it doesn't discriminate against anyone"

I ate too much kale? Maybe I hurt my bowel because I've eaten too much "real food"."

But with hindsight, Adele can recognise that she's not to blame – something her doctor promptly assured her. "Cancer is the great leveller, isn't it?" she sighs. "It can affect anyone at any time and doesn't discriminate." Now that she has a stoma and can no longer digest the veg-heavy diet she once enjoyed, Adele's learning to embrace big food. Spaghetti hoops with chicken dippers is now a common plat. To pour in the Roberts-Holderness household (following ninth-time viewings of *Pointless* and *Rachel Oshman's House of Games*). "It's made me see food differently [and understand] that sometimes, even if it's labelled as "bad food", it [can be] what your body needs."

As our allotted hour winds to a close, I ask Adele what she's picturing on the other side of her treatment and surgery – the image that's giving her hope. "It will be my mum's 60th birthday around the time that I finish, in May, so hopefully I'll have a big party with my friends and family to hopefully celebrate being cancer-free," she says – "fingers crossed!" Adele, Kate, Audrey – we're all rooting for you. **CB**



Above, ADELE WEARS: BRAND AND TROUSERS, BOTH H&M; JACKET, SCOTCH & SODA; LATE WEARS: JUMPSUIT, HER OWN; HERE, ADELE WEARS: BRA, BOTH H&M; JACKET, KITH & CO; TROUSERS, PEAKTION; TRAINERS, REEBOK; NECKLACE, RACHEL JACKSON LONDON