

Supple
Weeks.

skincare experts
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ults for yourself?



Like lots of people do, I went to Ibiza after my A levels with a gang of friends. And I was an idiot, as you are at that age – I partied hard and barely slept. We were all run-down when we arrived home, but only I ended up in hospital for six weeks, losing a big chunk of my lung function.

I'd always been aware I had cystic fibrosis (CF) – I was diagnosed at six months old – but it wasn't until Ibiza that I had a realisation about my life expectancy. I couldn't just bounce back in the way my friends did. It shocked me because it was the first time I'd been really ill in an adult ward. I remember looking into other patients' rooms thinking they must have been in car accidents, but when I asked the nurse what was wrong with them, she told me they had CF. I'd never seen people like me at a more advanced stage of the illness. It was a glimpse of my future.

It was then, when I was 18, that a doctor put a number on my life expectancy for the first time – 28. Ten more years. As though I'd never truly understood before, I suddenly thought, 'I've got a terminal illness. I'm going to die.'

CF is the UK's most common genetic disease. One in 25 people are carriers and if both your parents are, there's a one in four chance you'll have it. It's a fault in the gene that means the salt concentration in every cell in your body is wrong. It's hard to maintain a normal weight because your digestive system doesn't absorb fat properly. And the mucus in your lungs is

HOPE. LOVE. A FUTURE. WE TAKE THEM FOR GRANTED. BUT WHAT IF LIFE FORCED YOU TO TREASURE THE SMALL THINGS?

What happens to your happy ever after when doctors predict you won't live past 28? Cystic-fibrosis sufferer Rachel Agutter tells her story to Kerry Potter

much thicker than normal, so you have a bad cough and are prone to chest infections, which causes you to lose lung function. Lungs don't regenerate, so any damage is irreversible. The only option you have is to go on a lung-transplant list when your life expectancy is less than five years and your lung function is 30 per cent. Half of sufferers die before a transplant because there aren't enough donors.

Throughout my twenties, I had the age of 28 imprinted on my brain. As a result, I spent those years clubbing and staying up all night. I had no interest in long-term relationships. I wanted to have fun and for everyone else to have fun. Luckily, that's what they wanted at the time, too.

There was more to my life, though – working, commuting, paying bills – and

some people would ask (and still do) why I wasn't just living it up on a beach in Goa. It crossed my mind at times. But if I were, I'd be somebody who's not dealing with things very well. What would I do? Come back home when I'm at death's door? I've had my whole life to get used to the idea of being ill. I've always had a daily regime of physio to clear my lungs, used nebulisers and taken pills – it may sound awful to you, but anything can become normal with the passage of time. I've always had the same aspirations as my friends: getting my own place, having a career. I like that sort of life. I am probably an inherently sensible person. I worry about the future of the planet. I have savings. I do want to live life to the full – but it's normality that I aspire to. ➤

