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I loved chocolate and cappuccino but then a DIY testing kit told me they were making me ill, reveals Fay Ripley

By [Isla Whitcroft](#)

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Adapting: No more dairy treats for Fay Ripley

Waiting to appear on a live TV chat show, actress Fay Ripley suddenly realised she was in serious trouble.

'Without warning, I felt as if I was going to faint,' says Fay, star of hit dramas including *The Return Of Reggie Perrin* and *Cold Feet*.

'My heart was racing and my hands were shaking. I started to sweat and then I was hit by a wave of nausea.

'I knew it couldn't be a panic attack as mentally I felt fine, so I desperately tried to think if I had eaten something dodgy, but all I'd had was a cappuccino.

'Looking in the mirror, I remember saying to myself: "I just don't know how I am going to do this". But, somehow, I managed to get through two shows back-to-back, although I'm still not sure how.'

That incident earlier this summer was in fact the culmination of six months of vague but increasingly severe symptoms,

including stomach cramps, headaches, nausea and sickness. These had left Fay exhausted and worried about her health.

'At first the symptoms were low level and non-specific,' recalls Fay, 43. 'They were all easy to put down to something else.'

'When I had stomach pains, I thought it was a bug picked up from the children. If I had a headache, well, I had been working too hard and what working mum doesn't have the odd headache, anyway?'

'But as the symptoms got worse I began to worry more. I went abroad with the children and spent a day here and there in bed being sick or with bad stomach aches.'

Not long after her TV experience, Fay went on a family cruise. 'For most of the holiday I was quite ill,' says Fay, who lives in London with her husband, actor Daniel Lapaine, and children Sonny, three, and Parker, seven.

'It was all the usual symptoms but worse: I was light-headed and dizzy, had stomach pains and an upset stomach. With young children I had to get on with it but I spent most of the holiday feeling like some old maiden aunt moaning away and resolved that when I returned I was going to have deal with this problem for good.'

Back home, Fay thought about seeing her GP, but decided not to. Six years ago she'd suffered a bad bout of food poisoning which left her weak and with stomach pains for weeks afterwards.

'I had a long, drawn out few months of tests, with no conclusive diagnoses,' she recalls. 'It seems laughable now, but I even started to worry it was stomach cancer.'

'Finally, I bullied my GP into referring me to a consultant gastroenterologist who listened to my history, took one look at my pale face and dull eyes and worked out what was wrong without even examining me. I have a wheat intolerance.'

'He told me to stop eating wheat as it is hard for us to digest even when we are well. When we are unwell, such as after food poisoning, it is too difficult for the stomach to cope with and it doesn't pass through the body efficiently.'

'Whatever inconvenience there is in giving up dairy, it is far outweighed by the sheer delight in being free of pain'

'It hangs around producing bloating, pain and cramps, which leads to the exhaustion. I took his advice and stopped eating wheat.'

'Overnight my symptoms disappeared and I felt 100 per cent better. It was like a miracle.'

She had stayed off wheat ever since so knew her latest problems weren't caused by this; and six years on, she wasn't convinced she needed to see a GP, either.

'My symptoms were so vague and would come and go. I felt that if I went back to the GP I would go through exactly the same process as before of inconclusive blood tests, stomach examinations and vague mentions of viruses or IBS.'

Then a friend who suffered from food intolerances mentioned a new test, the Food Detective kit. This tests the blood for the presence of protein called IgG (Immunoglobulin type G) - the theory is that the body produces this when you're intolerant to a foodstuff.

It is a controversial area - many doctors and health care professionals question whether testing IgG levels can be used to diagnose a food intolerance.



Food detective: Fay discovered she was intolerant to cow's milk after using the home testing kit

Indeed, in July 2007 a House of Lords report on information and treatment of allergy and food intolerances noted: 'We are concerned that the IgG food antibody test is being used to diagnose food intolerance in the absence of stringent scientific evidence.'

But Fay, while initially sceptical herself, was keen to explore every avenue.

'My friend had spoken highly of this new kit. I'd also spent time reading about it and could see that there was solid research behind it,' she says.

The kit consists of a blood prick test, which you then 'wash' through a couple of different substances before dropping it into a tray containing around 60 different foods placed in numbered wells.

The claim is that colour changes indicate an intolerance to that food.

'Once I'd plucked up the courage to use the finger pricking device, within 40 minutes I saw quite a few changes on the tray,' says Fay. 'The readings indicated I was mildly intolerant to egg white and cocoa beans - which horrified me as I love chocolate.'

'The test also showed I had a severe intolerance to cow's milk and my heart sank.'

Fay had relied heavily on dairy produce since giving up wheat. 'I adore cheese, particularly cheddar, and I love chocolate,' she says cheerfully. 'Because I couldn't eat wheat, my pudding on a night out would be ice cream.'

But deep down the test result made a lot of sense to her. 'I was always ill on holiday, especially abroad. I used to blame it on the water, or a dodgy meal, but the truth was that I'd love nothing better than sitting in a café drinking cappuccinos and treating myself to a nice big gelato.'

'The attack in the TV studio came after I drank a very large cappuccino on an empty stomach. It all added up.'

To make doubly sure, Fay went to her GP and asked for a blood test to confirm the findings - he sent it off for analysis and the result came back as conclusive: Fay was intolerant to cow's milk.

An intolerance is very different from an allergy, which causes the body to produce too much of the protein IgE (immunoglobulin E).

Typically, an allergic reaction will occur within a few hours of eating the problem foodstuff, and the symptoms are far more severe and can even be life threatening.

They can include rashes, hives, coughing and severe vomiting. Only 2.5 per cent of the population suffer an allergy, the most common of which are to shellfish and nuts.

An intolerance, on the other hand, is not life-threatening, causing low level and wide-ranging symptoms, such as eczema, stomach bloating and headaches.

No one knows just how many people have a food intolerance, indeed some may think they have an intolerance but don't.

'Many of us live with these low level non-specific symptoms for far too long'

To further check the reliability of her results Fay asked her husband Daniel to take the test.

'I did wonder if it was the sort of test where everyone ends up being intolerant to something,' she admits. 'But Daniel was clear. Admittedly, there was a twinge of jealousy that he can eat what he wants and I can't!'

As it had done with wheat, once Fay cut out dairy all her symptoms disappeared. She decided to tackle cow's milk before giving up cocoa and egg white, which had shown a much lower reading.

'As part of the package, I was offered advice from a nutritionist,' she says. 'I had a chat with her but as I'd dealt with my wheat intolerance in the past I was confident I could manage it by myself.'

But the transformation didn't come easily. 'All my favourite things, the cheesy, pastry, creamy, chocolate treats I loved to eat, contained dairy.

'Even the recipes in my cookbook, Fay's Family Food, used cheese,' laughs Fay. 'But once I'd accepted that I had to give it up, I adapted quite quickly. I found a sheep's cheese that can substitute parmesan, a good dairy-free ice cream, and I can use goat's milk in baking.

'I believe many of us live with these low level non-specific symptoms for far too long.

'We get used to it and even if we do go to the doctors - they'll often struggle to make a diagnosis anyway.

'But whatever inconvenience there is in giving up dairy, it is far outweighed by the sheer delight in being free of pain and discomfort for the first time in nearly a year.'

- ***The Food Detective, £50, can be found at www.food-detective.com***

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