

Coronation Street star Denise Welch  
on the day her child nearly died

# My son was being slowly poisoned by gangrene

**B**EFORE I had my son Louis, I'd never known what it felt like to be a normal mum. For two years after I had his brother Matthew, 13 years ago, I suffered such bad postnatal depression that I was almost catatonic at times.

At worst, I would hang around in my dressing gown all day and descend into an emotional blackness, doing everything on autopilot.

After that, I was adamant I would never have another baby. But two years ago, when I was 42, a voice inside me was saying: 'If you don't have a baby now, you won't have one at all.'

My husband Tim Healy and I went for a romantic weekend in Amsterdam, and nine months later Louis was born.

Having him was the best thing I ever did. I was excited when he woke up instead of thinking 'Oh, God, not another day', as I had in the depths of my depression.

Of course, it wasn't all plain sailing. At six weeks, Louis had undergone a four-hour operation after doctors discovered he had been born with a rare condition called Hirschsprung's disease. It affects one in 5,000 babies.

The nerve endings don't form in a certain part of the baby's bowel and it means nothing can move in or out. The symptoms are not feeding and constipation.

As soon as the test results confirmed Louis had the disease, he was taken straight into surgery to remove 7in of the large intestine. But he made a complete recovery and our happy, bouncing baby seemed to be thriving.

When, on Sunday four weeks ago, he became ill, I wasn't too worried because Tim was suffering from gastroenteritis.

Louis, who was then 19 months old, had been sick all day, so I assumed he must have it, too. That afternoon, a GP friend popped round and told us to put Louis to bed and wait until morning because his tummy was soft, which was a good sign.

If he was still poorly then, we should take him to the doctor's because he could have adhesions — a build-up of unwanted scar tissue

By **SALLY  
BECK**

that can cause internal organs to stick together. It is rare but could have been due to the earlier surgery.

That Sunday, Louis slept 12 hours as normal but on Monday he was sick again. His tummy was rock hard and I could tell something was seriously wrong, so I went straight to the GP, who said Louis was very dehydrated and we should go to Macclesfield General Hospital.

I thought they would rehydrate him and send him home. But blood tests showed something else.

It is the worst feeling in the world watching your little boy having needles shoved into him. I wanted it to be me instead of him.

Eventually, they said Louis needed to see a specialist paediatrician because they could not diagnose what was wrong. It was 4pm and we'd been there since 10am. I was starting to panic.

Thankfully, by that time Tim had dosed himself up with every pill possible to get to the hospital.

We asked if Louis could be taken by ambulance to Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool because that's where he had been treated before, and, fortunately, they had a bed.

As soon as we arrived he was seen by a wonderful surgeon who said that there was something very nasty going on in Louis's tummy and they needed to operate.

I asked for the worst case scenario, and was told Louis was showing signs of a burst appendix, causing peritonitis, which is rare in a

child so young. I knew it could be serious, even fatal.

The doctors said he would be in surgery for an hour, but four-and-a-half hours later he still wasn't back.

Finally, the surgeon came out and told me Louis had indeed suffered adhesions — complications from the surgery he'd had at six weeks old, which meant his bowel had not knitted together correctly.

**T**HEY had removed 40cm of gangrenous small intestine, which had twisted and cut off the blood supply. I never asked how close Louis was to death. I didn't want to go down that road.

As a precaution, he was put on a ventilator in intensive care. I had to be strong for him, but I'd leave the room, burst into tears, then come back with that false smile and try to distract him with a book.

I was so wound up about everything that had happened, and my emotions were so close to the surface, everything would make me cry.

On the Friday, five days after Louis had been admitted, a pre-recorded interview I'd done on the Atkins diet was being shown on Tonight With Trevor McDonald.

We put the TV on in Louis's room, and when he saw himself and his house and his dog he burst into tears and kept saying: 'Home, Mummy. Home, Mummy.'



Worried about your child's health? Consult our online paediatrician at [www.femail.co.uk/experts](http://www.femail.co.uk/experts)



Loving: Denise Welch with her son Louis. Left: Louis in intensive care at Liverpool's Alder Hey Hospital

Picture: Alistair Devine

have wanted a cuddle, despite being wired up to so many monitors.

It also meant I could get some sleep, although I would wake up several times a night, thinking the phone was ringing with bad news.

Six days after Louis came out of surgery I was due to film a furniture commercial. People won't believe I left him to do it, but he had turned the corner and one's money-making life has to go on.

It was the last thing I felt like doing, and I told the director that if anything happened I'd be off the set. I found it very difficult to concentrate, and between each take I'd phone the hospital.

It was surreal to be bursting into tears one minute because he was doing well, and within seconds be pointing at a sofa, smiling and saying: 'Well, this one's down to £399.'

Louis was finally allowed home to Cheshire 11 days after surgery, and it was like he had never been away. He still has memories of the trauma. And if I pull up his top he starts to cry because he associates it with something that's going to hurt — such as a blood test.

But his mood has been fantastic. It's only now I've realised that he'd been having quite a few tantrums before his illness, which were probably because of the pain.

Louis's illness has also made us stronger as a couple and as a family. Before he was poorly I was fed up with Britain, the weather and even the business when I saw other actresses get jobs I wanted.

This has put a lot of things in perspective for me. It's made me realise I love living in this country because had I not been here, Louis might not be alive now.

And I now know I love the work I do, just that it's not the be all and end all — that's my family.

■ TO MAKE a donation to Ronald McDonald Children's Charities (RMCC) call 020 8700 7331 or visit [www.rmcc.org](http://www.rmcc.org)