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Hypochondriac Petra Ecclestone worried over every ache but when meningitis struck she found out what real suffering felt like

Ithought was dying. Luckily Dad kept his cool



By Bonnie Estridge

hen Petra Ecclestone pulled up in a white Rolls-Royce at Cas-tello Odescalchi near Rome, dripping with diamonds in an £80,000 Vera Wang dress to wed businessman James Stunt in August, you would be forgiven for thinking she was a spoilt princess cut off

from reality.

But while the daughter of Formula 1 billionaire Bernie enjoys a privileged life, she insists her feet

remain firmly on the ground. Her nuptials cost a breathtaking £12million – yet Petra insisted that no one buy her or James wedding gifts. Instead, she requested that her 270 guests donate as much money as possible to the Meningitis Trust, and they raised £150,000.

Her support for the trust stems from her brush with meningitis just over six years ago, an event she describes as 'life-changing'.

Petra, 22, says: 'Before getting meningitis, I was such a hypochon-driac, worrying about the slightest ache. Ironically, I overlooked meningitis because the symptoms seemed like flu. I guess you don't realise how healthy you are until it is taken away from you.'

Back in 2005, Petra was living with her father, her ex-model mother Slavica and her elder sister Tamara, 27, star of Channel 5 reality show Billion \$\$ Girl, in Chelsea, West London

She remembers vividly the Sepsine remembers vividity the september morning she developed the disease. 'A schoolfriend had stayed the night and the next morning I woke with a terrible headache. I kept complaining that I felt ill but, given the fact I was always moaning about my health, neither of my parents seemed concerned.

A little later Petra walked her friend to a nearby Tube station but was forced to return home by taxi within the space of the 15-minute walk she had deteriorated drasti-cally. 'My legs felt like lead and my handbag felt as if it weighed a ton – I was so weak I thought I was going to

Collapse,' she says.

When Petra walked through the door, Slavica took one look at her pale face and insisted she take her temperature. The reading came out at a startling 40C, so an urgent home visit from their GP was arranged.

When he arrived, he ran basic tests to check for meningitis. He asked Petra to bend her neck, and he shone a torch in her eyes and held a glass against her arm to check for a rash that did not disappear under pressure. 'I could barely move my neck as it felt so stiff, and I winced in pain from the light in my eyes,' she recalls. One telltale sign of meningitis is a rash that does not fade under pressure. But when he held a glass against my arm, there was nothing there,' she adds.

Despite the absence of this, the GP

suspected Petra was suffering from

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something serious and said she needed to be admitted to hospital immediately.

Meningitis is an infection of the meninges, the protective membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by bacteria or a virus. The meninges can become inflamed, and if it is not treated it can lead to permanent brain and nerve damage. About 2,500 cases of bacterial meningitis and twice that

number of viral meningitis are reported in the UK each year. 'Meningitis is more common dur-ing winter,' says Professor Simon Kroll at St Mary's Hospital and honorary medical director of the Meningitis Trust. 'Symptoms can include a fever – sometimes with cold hands and feet – vomiting, headache, stiff neck, an aversion to bright lights, joint or muscle pain, drowsiness and confusion.

'Symptoms can appear in any order

and some may not appear at all.'

If not treated, viral meningitis can leave victims with memory loss, poor concentration, persistent headaches, tiredness and depression. Bacterial meningitis not only inflames the meninges but can infect the blood, causing septicaemia, which triggers the red rash to develop on the skin. It kills roughly ten per cent of patients, and an estimated 15 per cent of those who survive will suffer brain damage.

Petra was horrified by the diagnosis. I was in a state of shock but I was in too much pain to cry. I'd only heard about babies and small children developing the condition and all the stories ended in tragedy. Mum was sobbing. Dad looked terribly worried too but managed to keep his cool and drive me to hospital.'

As soon as Petra arrived at the private Portland Hospital in Central London, she was given a lumbar puncture - also known as a spinal tap to determine what type of meningitis she had.

A long needle was inserted into her spinal cord to obtain a sample of cerebrospinal fluid. If a large number of white blood cells are present, it indicates that the menin-

gitis is bacterial.

'It hurt like hell,' says Petra. 'I vomited after the puncture, but thankfully after that I was given anti-nausea drugs. The doctors put me on a drip too, because I was

becoming dehydrated.'

Results showed that Petra was suffering with viral meningitis,

although she needed to remain in hospital for a further week for close monitoring because she was so weak.

'Because it was viral, I thought I'd be home by the end of the day,' she recalls. 'When I found out I'd be staying I was so scared - the thought of one night alone was terrifying. And because the doctors were concerned at my rapid decline, I was

convinced I was going to die.'
Once home, Petra was bedbound
for three weeks. A month later she was back at school but had lost nearly a stone in weight. She says she was far from well when she returned to her studies - she remained too weak to play sports and found it incredibly hard to concentrate in classes because she felt so tired.

'I also suddenly started to catch every bug going. I tried to fight back with high-strength multi-vitamins and extra Vitamin C and zinc for an immunity boost but it was acupuncture that made the real difference in getting me on my toes again.

'Mum's home cooking helped me

regain the pounds I'd lost, too.' It was only at the end of December that she felt back to normal. Though she was unscathed, the experience changed Petra's perspective on life, leading her to contact the Meningitis Trust to offer help. Since then, she

has become a charity ambassador.
'Meningitis scared the hell out of me,' she says. 'I realise how important it is to look after your health, especially your immune system. I still take lots of supplements and regularly have acupuncture. I do still have a tendency to Google any bizarre symptoms I might have. But I try to focus this energy into raising awareness about meningitis.
'It is essential people are diagnosed

quickly, regardless of what type they have – if I'd ignored my symptoms I might not be here today

www.meningitis-trust.org



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'IT WAS LIFE-CHANGING': Petra, top, is now an ambassador for the Meningitis Trust. Above: With her father Bernie before her wedding this year