

Summertime recipes

A good night's sleep

# Organic NZ

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# Balance and harmony in mind and body

An unexpected cancer diagnosis was a wake-up call that led to positive changes for Christchurch outdoor enthusiast Vanessa Lukes, writes **Anne Gastinger**

**L**ife sometimes delivers us a blind-sider, a punch when least expected that penetrates our defences, creating mayhem with our game plans. Nine years ago, aged only 30, Vanessa Lukes experienced such a moment when diagnosed with a tumour in the small intestine.

"It came from out of the blue," she recalls. Within 24 hours of diagnosis, Vanessa underwent surgery to remove the tumour. But as many know the road travelled post-operatively is no easy undertaking. For Vanessa that path to wellness has brought about many changes in her beliefs, attitudes and lifestyle.

## Pushing life to the limits

Prior to cancer, this young, extremely fit, outdoor enthusiast's activities included mountaineering, rock climbing and competing in adventures such as the five-day Southern Traverse race. Only four months prior to diagnosis, Vanessa and her partner Ollie enjoyed an exciting though strenuous ice climbing and skiing holiday in Canada.

So when Vanessa visited her general practice clinic complaining of stomach-ache symptoms, the doctors who examined her suspected simply that. Not till the third return visit was a CT scan ordered that identified a tumour blockage in the bowel.

Advised that the disadvantages of chemotherapy for this type of cancer outweighed any gains it could provide, Vanessa waited a further two months post surgery before an MRI scan revealed the cancer had not advanced to her liver. At this point her medical advisors felt it would be fine to return to work. In retrospect Vanessa views that advice as totally wrong. Her work teaching English as a second language was "physically really draining. It took a good six months to recover if not longer because my qi (life force) was shot, it was totally depleted, not just by the cancer but by my previous lifestyle."

## Healthy nutrition

Bowel cancer is usually seen in people aged over 60, and can be associated with poor diets that include too much red meat and alcohol. "That struck me as something I had never done. I was the one who got teased in the staff room for having such a healthy lunch," recalls Vanessa.

The question here begging an answer is 'why me?' Other people living lifestyles similar to her own hadn't developed this disease. Her medical advisors had no answers beyond simply 'there's no reason, you were just unlucky'.

Post surgery Vanessa could easily have chosen to just get on with life but she felt it wasn't normal to get cancer, and there had to be something she could do.

Her first step was to focus on healthy nutrition. "It's a really good start. It gives you a good sense of doing something positive and constructive. I got a juicer, did the carrot and beetroot juices, took the vitamins and mineral supplements, ate organic vegetable salads, raw food, cut out sugar, tea and coffee."

## A wake-up call that led to qigong

But as Vanessa observed, the irony in this approach is that it wasn't much different from how she had eaten before, only more focused. She felt her lifestyle changes required more than intensifying her existing healthy dietary habits or exercise, as in 'if I kept doing what I'm doing, I'd keep getting what I'd gotten'.

"A lot of people become sick even though they eat organic food and exercise regularly. The cancer was a wake-up call to look at my whole life, and to change," she says.

Vanessa's search led her to qigong, an ancient Chinese form of movement and meditation that exercises the flow of qi. Qi means energy or life-force, and gong means work or cultivation. Its goal is to improve one's health, vitality and well being, with its foundational principle being to maintain a tranquil mind.

**Above:** Vanessa Lukes finds qigong a helpful tool to keep a calm, relaxed and joyful mind



Initially sceptical of qigong, Vanessa heard things she didn't believe but still persevered with it. "It was reverse logic: to change the outside, you must change the inside – change habits, behaviours, thoughts, making everything more positive – keeping a calm, relaxed and joyful mind in everything. The mind is so powerful and qi follows the mind. All our thoughts affect our qi and that affects our body. Work on the master – our mind," she advises.

Vanessa was so impressed with her own positive response and the health benefits she observed in other people practising qigong that she went on to complete her training with Master Yuan Tze, who lives in Wellington, and teaches Zhiheng Qigong, a series of easy-to-learn movements to increase flexibility, balance and coordination.

"Some of these exercises are challenging to do but all of them can be modified and adapted to suit the person's health," says Vanessa. "The practice of qi gong requires motivation and discipline. The benefits of improved physical and emotional well being, sharper focus and awareness are worth all the hard work."

### Eastern approach to healing through diet

The Eastern healing viewpoint differs in many respects from the allopathic approach to healing. Vanessa was advised to start her day with a warm breakfast because warm or cooked food and drinks are best for a depleted qi condition and more restorative to qi flow. Vegetarian diets are regarded as light in qi whereas meat has denser qi – especially wriggly animal parts, for example chicken feet or pigs' trotters (both good for making bone broths). It is also thought that eating the (organically produced) organ meat of an animal strengthens the person's corresponding organ energy. Foraging and gathering wild edible plants is encouraged too in the belief they have stronger, fresher qi.

### Cycling and gardening part of her lifestyle

After the diagnosis of cancer, Vanessa's main focus was on being alive in five years' time. "Crossing that milestone was wonderful," she says with a smile. "Now it's the bigger purpose, the environment, earth – this planet." By not owning a car, her bike has become a means of transport rather than a workout machine. She keeps herself busy teaching qigong, editing qigong textbooks, writing regular e-newsletters, and organising the annual qigong November retreat, along with setting up the RenXue Life Development Trust.

This is a great lifestyle, combined with her gardening interests, which include participating in a community organic gardening co-operative, organising the courses for Te Puna Oranga o Seven Oaks Organics, and co-coordinating the Southern Seed Exchange which has its seed shed at the Seven Oaks site. Ollie and Vanessa harvest edible seaweed, grow their own vegetables and since January 2011 have been doing 'humanure composting'.

"We harvested our first batch of compost a couple of months ago and it looks amazing!" she exclaims. She keeps her family and friends up to date with their gardening progress at [simplylivingnz.blogspot.co.nz](http://simplylivingnz.blogspot.co.nz).

### Mind, body, planet – all interconnected

As a writer with a special interest in environmental issues I'm often focusing on the negative effects from pollution generated by human activities but Vanessa reminds me how we often forget our mind is creating invisible pollution. All our thoughts are affecting our qi, and that affects our body. And it's not just about ourselves.

"I love the natural environment. But it's becoming clear that we are going off-track – look at climate change, peak oil, food production – the whole system. Our poor health, the state of our society and the planet's condition are all interconnected," she exclaims.

### A balanced life and a calm mind

Vanessa still enjoys climbing mountains but it's not about conquering them anymore. The former adrenaline junkie who used to love pushing her body to the limit, states "from a qi point of view that's very qi depleting." A balanced life rather than living life at the extremes best describes Vanessa's attitude these days.

"Qigong is just a tool – you shouldn't need it if you're living a balanced life with a calm relaxed mind and you're not depleting your qi. If someone going through cancer treatment is reading this the main thing is to keep the mind in a calm relaxed state." For Vanessa it was qigong that helped her achieve this, but she observes it may not be the tool for others. "If you find something that resonates for you, follow your instincts – your intuition," she says.

Ill health presents obstacles and challenges. Qigong and diet are two strategies amongst many to renewed health. ☐

Freelance writer **Anne Gastinger** lives in Christchurch and cares about environmental and health related matters



Photo: Anne Gastinger



Photo: Anne Gastinger



Photo: Colin Cullen

**Top:** Vanessa collecting edible seaweed at Tayor's Mistake (now out of bounds due to earthquake damage). Seaweed has anti-cancer properties – scientists have found that undaria (*Undanapinnifolia* or wakame) inhibits the growth of several types of cancer cells (see the TV3 news story: [nynr.com/b7do2p/](http://nynr.com/b7do2p/))

**Middle:** Vanessa Lukes with fresh produce from Te Puna Oranga o Seven Oaks Organics in Christchurch

**Bottom:** An outdoor adventurer, Vanessa used to push her body to extremes with physical exercise. Not having an understanding of qi, she would let her hands or feet become very cold and expose her body to the elements, e.g. go for a run lightly clad on a cold windy day

Christchurch readers interested in qigong classes can email [vanessalukes@gmail.com](mailto:vanessalukes@gmail.com). See also [www.yuantzeentre.com](http://www.yuantzeentre.com)