

# 'I'm proof you CAN be ill but still have a great body': Man with chronic bowel condition avoids life-changing surgery by weight-lifting and giving up carbs

- Jonathan Benson, 33, was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis in 2003
- After a bad flare up, doctors said he needed surgery to remove his colon
- This would leave him with a colostomy bag for the rest of his life
- Instead, he insisted on managing his illness with a strict diet and exercise

By [MADLEN DAVIES FOR MAILONLINE](#)

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Seven years ago, Jonathan Benson was lying in a hospital bed, with doctors threatening to remove his colon.

He had been battling ulcerative colitis, a chronic bowel condition, that had left him with agonising stomach pains and diarrhoea and on a daily basis.

Now unable to to walk, let alone work, doctors warned drastic action was necessary.

In reality, an operation to remove his bowel - leaving him with a colostomy bag - was the best course of action to save his health.



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**Jonathan Benson weighed 19st at age 20 (pictured left), but after developing ulcerative colitis he gave up carbohydrates and took up weight lifting. He is now a muscular 15st (right) and**

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**In 2007 doctors said Mr Benson would need to have his colon removed (he is pictured, left, after coming out of hospital). But he decided to manage his illness through diet and exercise (pictured right)**

But, desperate to avoid this option at all costs, Mr Benson persuaded medics he could fight his way back to health using diet and exercise.

Now, after banishing carbohydrates and taking up weight-lifting five times a week, the 33-year-old not only has the physique of a fitness model, but says he has never been healthier.

He adds that while he is not normally the type to take photographs of himself in the mirror, he decided to share his story to show others that the condition can be managed without surgery.

Mr Benson, a web developer from Hitchin, Hertfordshire, first discovered the power of 'clean living' when he was 20.

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Growing up, his family had moved around a lot and he had become reclusive, spending a lot of time playing computer games and chatting to others online.

By the age of 20, he weighed 19st (121 kg), smoked and had a very sedate lifestyle working as a web developer.

He told MailOnline: 'One day I was sitting in the office surrounded by smoke when I thought "this is a one-way ticket to an early grave", and decided to do something about it.'

He began reading fitness magazines, cycling to work and changed his diet, swapping sandwiches and crisps for fish and vegetables, until he began seeing results.

After 18 months, he weighed a muscular 15st (93 kg).

But in 2002, he began having stomach pains and then developed diarrhoea, which contained blood.

Over the course of a year, the periods of illness became more frequent and he lost 2st in weight.

He said: 'I went to see GP who thought I had food poisoning as I'd just come back from holiday.

'Looking back, I knew something was wrong but I was hiding from it.

'With those kinds of symptoms I had discovered from my own research it could either be Crohn's or bowel cancer, and I didn't want to have either.'

A year on, he was referred to a specialist who diagnosed ulcerative colitis, a long-term condition where the colon and rectum become inflamed.

While the steroids he was prescribed to ease the symptoms of colitis helped, they caused his muscles to waste away and water retention around his face causing a 'moon-face' look.

He said: 'By this point I'd lost all I'd gained, physique-wise, anyway.

'Medicine is incredible, because it stopped the inflammation in my body.

'I'd gone from not being able to walk, being ill all the time, to normal, thanks to the steroids.'

But with prolonged use, the steroids can carry side-effects such as thinning of the bones, increases in blood pressure and cholesterol, so they are not recommended as a long-term solution.

However, for Mr Benson, the only alternative doctors were offering were immune-suppressants, which would leave him vulnerable to infection.

'Every time I'd come off the steroids, my symptoms would return, he recalled.

## WHAT IS ULCERATIVE COLITIS?

Ulcerative colitis is a long-term condition, where the colon and rectum become inflamed.

The colon is the large intestine (bowel), and the rectum is the end of the bowel where stools are stored.

Small ulcers can develop on the colon's lining, and can bleed and produce pus.

The main symptoms of ulcerative colitis are:

- recurring diarrhoea, which may contain blood, mucus or pus
- abdominal pain
- needing to empty the bowels frequently

The severity of the symptoms varies, depending on how much of the rectum and colon is inflamed and how severe the inflammation is.

For some people, the condition has a significant impact on their everyday lives.

Some may go for weeks or months with very mild symptoms, or none at all (known as remission), followed by

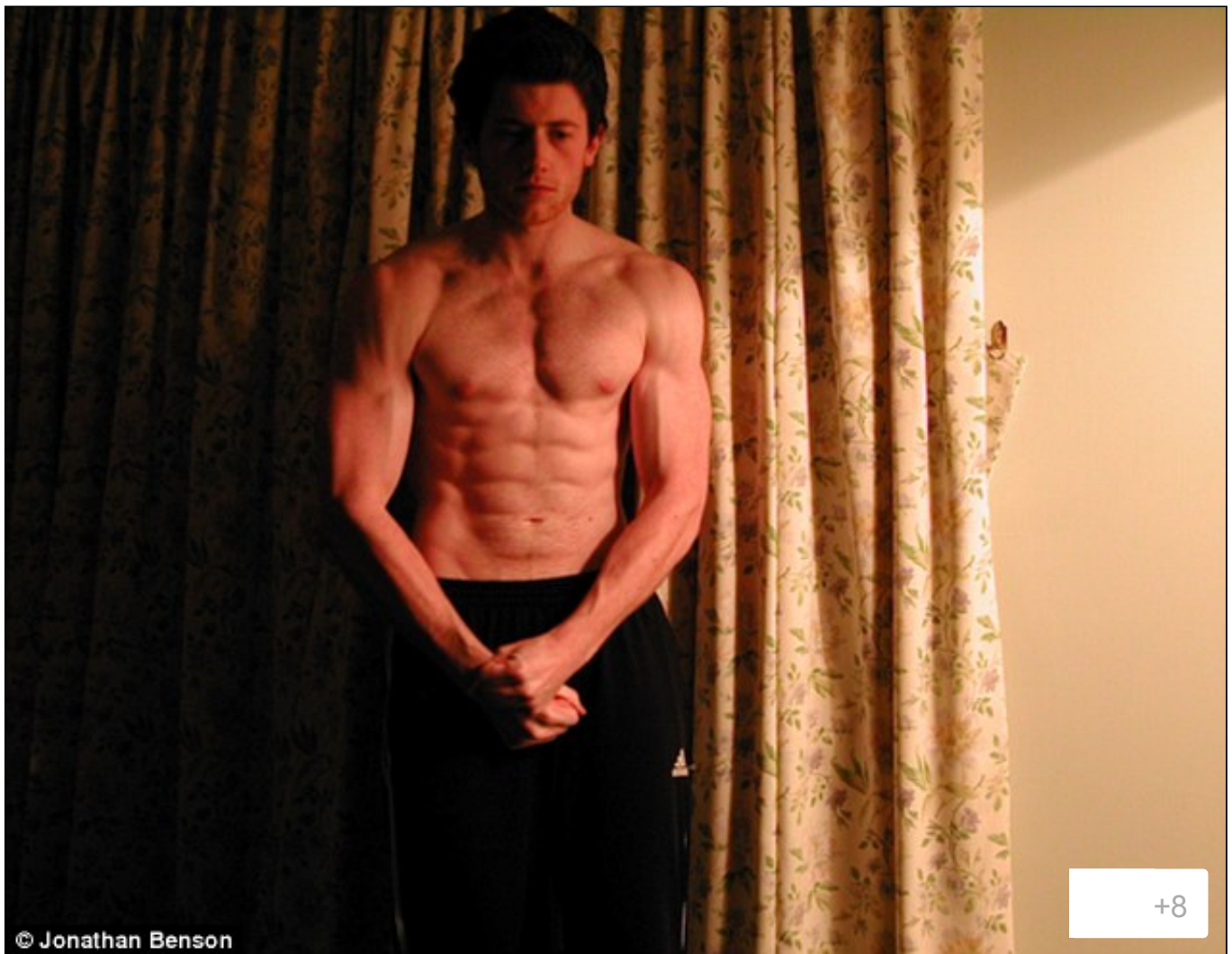
'I didn't want to be on drugs or immune system-suppressants. I'm not a drugs person.'

periods where the symptoms are particularly troublesome (known as flare-ups or relapses).

Source: **NHS Choices**



**Mr Benson was in such good health he was able to travel around Vietnam last December. He says his diet has allowed him to manage his symptoms**



**Mr Benson is pictured in 2003, at the peak of his fitness, and before being diagnosed with ulcerative colitis**

He began searching for other ways of managing his condition, and came across the Specific Carbohydrate diet.

This is a strict form of the Paleo diet, which involves eating only food that was available before agriculture.

This means avoiding all processed foods and carbohydrates including bread, pasta, rice, milk, grains, wheat.

Instead, followers eat only meat, fish, vegetables and nuts.

'You redress the balance of bacteria in the gut,' he explained.

'Since we started eating processed food in the last 10,000 years, the bacteria that has colonised our guts has changed.

'The new mix of gut bacteria, which breaks down simple sugars, releases toxins, which some people, like me, are more sensitive to.'

He added: 'Giving up cookies and bread and pizza seemed like something I could do, so that I didn't have to take more serious medications.'

After an introductory phase in which he ate nothing but carrots and chicken, he broadened his diet

## MR BENSON'S DIET AND TRAINING

### DIET:

The specific carbohydrate diet is a very strict form of the Paleo diet.

Mr Benson avoids eating bread, pasta, rice, milk, grains and wheat - and never 'cheats' with this rule.

His usual daily intake consists of eggs and spinach in the morning.

For lunch, he eats tuna, tomatoes

slightly to include fish, eggs, nuts and vegetables.

However he admits sticking to the diet was difficult as it was so restrictive, and affected his social life.

He said: 'Once I regained my health, I realised all of society's social aspects are focused around drinking and eating.

'You can't go to restaurants, you can't go out drinking. You have to get used to a certain amount of isolation.'

Once he got used to this way of eating, however, along with going to the gym on a daily basis, he found the regimen kept his symptoms at bay.

Over time, to his delight, his former muscly physique returned.

But five years later, in 2007, he suffered a flare up which landed him in hospital for eight days, and on an IV drip of steroids to control the inflammation.

Doctors told him they needed to operate to remove his colon, and he would definitely be put on immunosuppressant drugs.

He said this prospect left him 'terrified'.

He said: 'If you're lucky they'll attach your colon to your outside, and worst case scenario you'll have a bag attached to your middle.

and green beans.

During the day, he snacks on nuts for energy.

For dinner he cooks meat and vegetables.

In total, he eats around 3,200 calories.

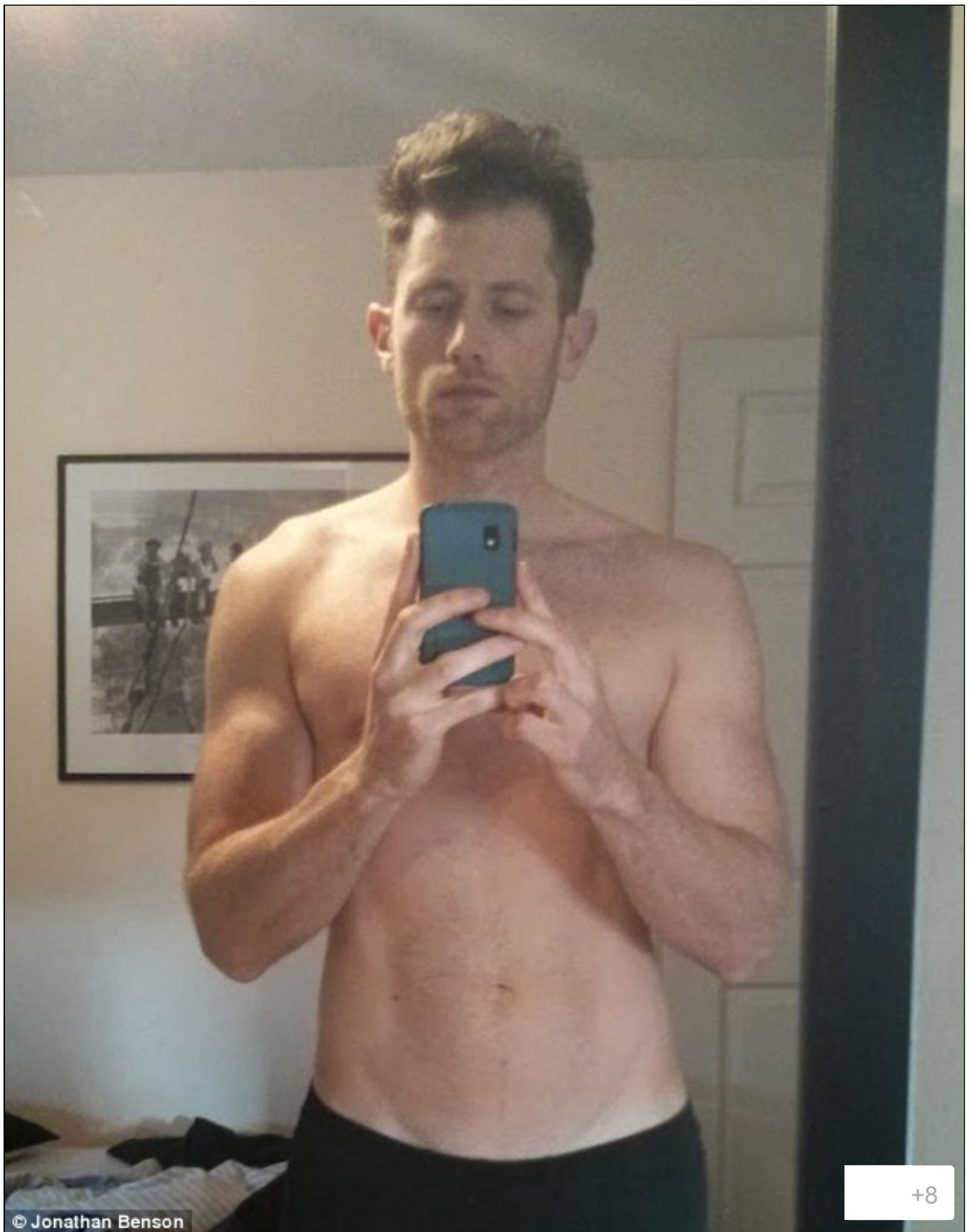
### **EXERCISE:**

Mr Benson trains between once and twice a day.

He lifts weights, focusing on a different part of his body over the course of a week.

He also attends yoga classes for flexibility and strength.





**Mr Benson is pictured last year, after a snowboarding accident left him unable to weight lift. He said he would not normally share pictures of himself, but hopes his story will inspire others battling ulcerative colitis**

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© Jonathan Benson

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**'I'm so lucky I didn't end up with a colostomy bag,' Mr Benson, pictured here as a teenager, now says**

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'I just insisted they didn't. There was something inside me that said that this wasn't the end, I should fight, I could get back to health.

'It came down to faith and fear of the alternative.

'I needed one more chance to stick with diet and exercise; what I knew had helped in the past.

'I insisted they give me another six months.'

Once again, he left hospital having gone from a muscular 15st to 12st.

But he began his diet again straight away, and started going to the gym to lift weights as soon as possible.

And his determination has paid off.

In the last seven years, he has come off steroids completely, and now only takes a weak mild inflammatory drug similar to aspirin.

He credits his diet with 'saving' him from a more limited life with a colostomy bag.

He said: 'I'm so lucky I didn't end up with a bag.

'To be now sitting, at 33, in the best condition of my life, I really think it is remarkable that diet and exercise - and keeping myself positive - has saved me.'

He now hopes his story will inspire others battling the condition.

He said: 'I think teenage boys would be inspired by the story.

'If you're affected by colitis you lose your weight, you lose muscle.

'You don't want to speak to your mates about how you've got bloody diarrhoea.

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*I'm so lucky I didn't end up with a colostomy bag. I wanted to tell my story to say, you can be healthy, you can be fit, you can have a desirable physique*

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**Jonathan Benson**

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'People are treated by doctors that are medicine based – so doctors don't offer this path of diet and exercise.

'I wanted to say, you can be healthy, you can be fit, you can have a desirable physique.'

### The Facts: Crohn's vs Ulcerative Colitis

