Jill Murphy, with her husband, Luc, at their Alexandria home, suffered lengthy problems stemming from her mother's use of diethylstilbestrol in the 1950s.

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HEALTH

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Their own—and even their children’s—health problems.

Children of women given the hormone DES decades ago now cope with
A story because our ability to ask women who took DES if they did is passing, but physicians who prescribed the drug may have gone out of practice or their records destroyed," said CDC spokeswoman Arsha L. Vanderford. "While the opportunity to find out if you were exposed is exciting . . . the health effects are ongoing." Vanelous recalls she was sitting in a hair salon in 1971, idly flipping through a women's magazine, when she happened across an article about DES and its newly established link to vaginal cancer.

She kept the news from her daughter for years until Jill began to menstruate. At age 12, when specialists recommended the 14-year-old girl be examined for complications, tests revealed that Jill had a malformed cervix, a common result of DES exposure. Doctors warned that she would live the rest of her life with the threat of vaginal cancer until her teens. There were, as far as researchers knew, no other problems associated with the drug.

But the other risks of DES became clear in 1998 as Murphy, then 34, and her husband, Luc Murphy, began to try to have children. Murphy repeated her mother's history of failed pregnancies. Tests revealed she had a T-shaped uterus, a classic symptom of exposure to DES. After three failed pregnancies, the Alexandria couple concluded they would have no biological children.

"I knew about the cancer but never, ever was I told that I could have fertility problems," said Murphy, one of thousands of women who have filed suits against DES drug makers and won settlements since 1979. "DES took my right to have children. It took the rights of thousands of women."

While damage claims have not been easy to prove, almost every case has been filed before trial, with payouts ranging from $50,000 to $4 million. Publicity from these lawsuits and years of grassroots organizing by women's health groups led to the creation of a program of outreach, education and research about DES.

Every year scientific studies reveal new insights into the drug, which was taken by an estimated 4.8 million women and then exposed an estimated 4.8 million children.

To date, most of the research has focused on the troubles suffered by daughters exposed in utero. According to findings published in 2001 in the American Journal of Epidemiology, these women have a higher infertility rate and are two times more likely to have a miscarriage or premature labor than unexposed women.

Lisa Summers, pictured above and below with her adopted 8-year-old son, Nicholas, was left unable to bear children because of her exposure to DES in the womb. A study released last year by National Cancer Institute researchers showed, at least preliminarily, that DES daughters over age 40 are 2.5 times more likely to experi-