

Jennifer's story

I was 32 years old when I first told my husband that I wanted to try for a baby. We were on holiday at the time, but I had been thinking about it for several months. Luckily we had no way of knowing that nearly 5 years of misery would follow on from that decision or we might never have made it. We had been married for 9 months, although we had lived together for about 8 years.

I was a little disappointed when the expected pregnancy failed to happen immediately when we started trying. I read somewhere that 90% of couples conceive within a year of trying so I reasoned that I didn't have anything to worry about.

Mounting stress

Instead I had work problems because, due to expansion and restructuring at work, I missed out on being appointed to a new position. I considered resigning but my husband talked me out of it, pointing out that I would be leaving soon enough to have a baby. From this point onwards the stress really began to pile up as the feeling of being unappreciated at work compounded the monthly disappointments.

In due course I consulted my GP, but none of the tests we had undergone showed any reason why I couldn't conceive. My situation was made even more difficult by the fact that my two sisters both had babies within a month of each other after I had been trying for a year. I don't think anyone realised how hard it was for me to be around babies at this time, so normal family occasions became a torment with the result that I became very distant from my family.

Starting fertility treatment

When we had finished all the available tests we were told that the next step would be to try artificial insemination. The doctor who told us this said, without the slightest hint of sympathy, that there would be a 20 percent chance of success. At that time I knew very little about fertility treatment as I had naively assumed that eventually a diagnosis would be found that would indicate what course of action was necessary. It seemed insane to start treatment without any idea of the cause.

The doctor also told us that the treatment was not at that time available on the NHS but that this was about to change as NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) had recommended that couples should be given 6 cycles of IUI (intrauterine insemination) and 3 cycles of IVF (in vitro fertilisation). We were told to contact the hospital in 3 months time to find out about IUI.

I called the hospital as instructed 3 months later. A very kind secretary told me they still didn't know if fertility treatment would be available but I should try calling again after another 3 months. I was depressed that I had wasted 3 months when we could have started treatment privately, but I was also afraid to start paying for treatment because we did not have much money. We decided to wait until the New Year.

When January came I spoke to the same secretary – she still couldn't tell me anything. The consultant she worked for at the local NHS hospital also had his own private clinic so when she offered me the phone number I took it and arranged a consultation.

By this time I was desperate and I wanted to start treatment immediately, but when we saw the consultant he assured us that NHS treatment for infertility really was going to happen in the new financial year. He was obviously hoping that his clinic was going to win the contract and told us we had nothing to lose by waiting. I asked if there would be any waiting list and was assured that there would not.

Against my better judgement I was persuaded to wait for yet another 3 months, but when the time came, the same secretary told me a different hospital some distance away had been chosen and they had a 6 month waiting list.

My experience of fertility treatment

I finally started treatment a whole year after I had been diagnosed with unexplained infertility. The first cycle of IUI cost £670 and wasn't successful. We tried again 2 months later and when this cycle also failed I was utterly devastated. My depression was so bad that I often had thoughts of ending my own life. I don't know what I would have done but fortunately a referral came through for one of the major hospitals.

There were hundreds of couples at the patient information evening. It was very informative but my heart sank when the success rate was discussed. Of each cycle started only a quarter would result in a pregnancy and the individual chance of success was lower in women over 35. I was a few days away from my 35th birthday.

When we went for our individual consultation we were relieved to find that we would be able to have IVF but as Christmas was approaching we could not start until the New Year. Although we now had something to look forward to, the previous failures had taken their toll and I was so depressed that I was signed off work for 2 weeks. When I went back I promised myself that I would leave if the IVF failed, as I couldn't take the stress any more.

My experience of embryo transfer

The treatment went well with 6 eggs collected, all of which fertilised. Two were transferred in line with the guidance in the hospital's information booklet and the other four were frozen.

We were not given any individual assessment of the likelihood of a successful outcome, let alone a multiple birth. I didn't even discuss this decision with my husband because I was convinced the procedure would fail. Since one baby seemed an impossible dream, it never occurred to either of us that we might have twins.

My experience of multiple pregnancy

I could hardly believe it when the pregnancy test was positive and even more amazed when the first scan 3 weeks later showed that I was carrying twins. I was delighted but became slightly anxious when the risks of multiple births suddenly hit the headlines.

Nevertheless the pregnancy advanced without any problems and when the babies had still not arrived by 39 weeks, I agreed to have them induced on my due date.

My experience of multiple birth

Just 4 days prior to the planned induction I had some unexplained bleeding and it was decided to proceed immediately. After about 12 hours of labour there were concerns that Twin 1 was in distress due to the Syntocinon (a synthetic version of the naturally-occurring hormone oxytocin, used to induce labour or increase the strength of contractions) so it was discontinued. The contractions seemed to stop immediately so I knew I would have to have a caesarean. This was the one thing I had wanted to avoid, but the prospect of finally seeing my babies swept my fears aside.

They were born early in the morning, a boy and a girl, weighing 5lb 6oz and 6lb 4oz respectively. I'll never forget hearing their first cries, because even then part of me still didn't quite believe they were real.

An anxious time

Unfortunately things started to go wrong for me shortly afterwards. The midwife told my husband he should go home, while I was still in the recovery room. He did so, under the impression that everything was fine and the babies and I would be transferred to the ward in a little while.

It seemed like I was left alone for hours. A doctor kept coming in and out saying she would check the babies' blood sugar. When she finally did she discovered that my son needed immediate feeding and he was whisked away. Then the

midwife who had sent my husband home took my daughter away so that I could sleep. Although I had been awake for over 24 hours I didn't want to sleep and I couldn't rest because I was worrying about the twins.

Reunited with the twins

Eventually I was transferred to the ward and we were reunited. I was shocked by the sight of my son, who had had a rough time during the labour and now had a tube in his nose. No one had warned me about the tube and I felt I had let him down during the first few hours of his life.

The nurses wanted me to try and breastfeed him but by that point I was anxious about my daughter and insisted on breastfeeding her. It was a pointless argument anyway as I didn't have any breast milk.

Problems with breastfeeding

Over the next few days I repeatedly tried to breastfeed the twins, getting more and more distressed by my inability to do so. The ward was hot, crowded, dirty and constantly noisy with very erratic staffing levels.

With hindsight I am sure that a hot shower and a meal would probably have gone a long way to solving my problem. Eventually I started to hallucinate through lack of sleep. The depression that had vanished when I got pregnant seemed to have returned.

The threat of postnatal depression

I couldn't bear to be depressed again so I asked for help and was referred to a psychiatrist attached to the maternity ward. She diagnosed postnatal depression and urged me to take antidepressants, but there was something about her unwillingness to talk about my hospital experience that made me hesitate. I decided to wait until I was at home before making any decisions.

At home with the twins

It was such a relief to be home again that I soon recovered. I felt that a new mum is entitled to be emotional and I could do without any more interference. My milk came through the morning after I left hospital, but by then I was formula feeding and didn't have the heart to try breast-feeding again. In fact my husband took over the milk preparation for most of the first year, which took the pressure off me and enabled him to get involved.

Life with twins is undoubtedly hard work, but I have no regrets over my decision to have 2 embryos replaced. The immediate aftermath of their birth was traumatic, but I have met enough mothers of single babies who had similar or worse experiences to know that there are some things in life we just can't control. Above all, I am thankful every day that I have a son and a daughter and that there are only four embryos left frozen and not five.