

Lucy's story

I never thought I'd have difficulties conceiving – there is no history of infertility in our family or my husband's so we both felt it would just be a matter of months before we fell pregnant after getting married.

A year later I started to think perhaps things weren't going to be so easy. Five years later we found ourselves no longer able to ignore the fact that we were going to need assistance to get pregnant.

I'm not sure anyone can really understand how difficult it is to be stuck in a situation of wanting something so badly and each month being disappointed and eventually the disappointment dissolves into desperation and you find yourself in this awful 4 week cycle, 2 weeks of trying, 2 weeks of waiting, 1 day of crying when your period starts and then picking yourself up to try again.

I had done everything feasibly possible to fall pregnant naturally; we'd had every test the NHS offered, I changed my diet, did acupuncture, reflexology, and gave up alcohol, all to no avail.

Infertility treatment

In desperation I gave up work and we decided to see my consultant privately for a fresh round of tests and seek his advice about a suitable clinic for treatment. Out of the blue these tests identified a reason for our situation – we had male factor infertility. I was extremely angry for a while that we'd wasted so long when it turned out that ICSI really was our only option. However, this was eventually overridden by overwhelming relief that, with a reason for our infertility, it was easier to tailor our treatment and our chance of success was higher.

From the outset I made my wishes clear. I wanted to go for a blastocyst transfer as I knew this gave us the best chance of a pregnancy. Although this did increase the chance of a multiple pregnancy, it had such an increased success rate that I felt the risk was worth it. Given the costs of treatment you really do want to maximise your chances of success.

My decision on embryo transfer

I researched our treatment and our clinic thoroughly before making any choices, and we both went to counselling together and separately. Five years of trying for a baby had left me wanting the best chance and the best possible outcome from my ICSI, whether that resulted in a multiple birth or not.

I knew all the risks associated with a multiple birth, the chances of it happening and the statistics at my clinic. Personally, I felt that if I did fall pregnant with twins,

whilst I knew it would be harder, it would be a double blessing. It didn't seem too unnatural to me as I have twin sisters, twin aunties and both my grandfathers were twins.

I had a simple ICSI cycle and responded brilliantly to treatment, coping really well both physically and mentally. I had 21 eggs on collection and 14 fertilised. It quickly became obvious that a blastocyst transfer would be viable and we had 2 great quality embryos put back on day 5. The embryologist was frank about the chance of the embryos dividing and possibly ending up with 2, 3 or even 4 babies.

In hindsight, whilst I felt I could cope with 2, I'm not sure how I would have felt about more! We had 6 other embryos that made it to the blastocyst stage frozen for use later.

During my two week wait for the outcome of treatment I was convinced it hadn't worked. I didn't have a single symptom of pregnancy and eventually I caved in and tested on day 10 – a strong positive. I don't think I can explain how that felt! My blood test on day 14 showed my bhcg level to be 1324 – for some reason then I had a sneaking suspicion it was twins. I had some spotting early on and had a 6 week scan at my local Early Pregnancy Unit – that confirmed 2 tiny sacs. It was twins!

My experience of multiple pregnancy

I had 2 further scans at my clinic at weeks 7 and 10. Both times the embryos had strong heartbeats. I had a nuchal scan at 13 weeks and at week 20 we were given the all clear at our anomaly scan... It was real, we were having 2 babies!

I was from the start absolutely elated and incredibly positive. I aimed to have as normal and as natural a pregnancy and birth as I could and to be honest that's what I got! I had no morning sickness and only 2 weeks (5 to 7) of extreme tiredness. I did yoga twice a week, swam 3–4 days a week until 2 weeks before the end of my pregnancy and power walked either outside or on a jogger until I was 6 months.

My consultant supported my wish for a natural delivery, dependent on the position of the twins. I felt incredibly well until 32 weeks. I had some mild carpal tunnel from quite early on but nothing too horrendous (and this is common in singleton pregnancies too). Around 30 weeks I developed symphysis pubis dysfunction, which made sleeping quite uncomfortable and unless I slept supported it was painful to walk the next day, but I kept swimming and the yoga and acupuncture helped with this.

At 32 weeks my presenting twin turned breech and I tried everything I could to turn them – acupuncture, yoga, etc, to no avail. At 34 weeks I felt a definite change in the babies' positions and I had a slight scare where I thought my waters were leaking. This was the only incident where I required any monitoring in hospital outside the normal routine care you receive for twins. A scan showed my presenting twin had engaged into the pelvis and both twins were a good size. There was a concern I was going to go into labour naturally and require an emergency section so the decision was made for an elective caesarean at 36+3 weeks.

I was incredibly disappointed – I was all set for a natural vaginal delivery and had done everything in my power to ensure this is what I got, but nature had other ideas. I would say that the last 2 weeks of my pregnancy were pretty painful: due to the baby engaging I had awful sciatica, I was too big for my bath so had to go to my parents' to have a wash! I had quite a bit of fluid retention in my hands, legs and face and was really, really uncomfortable. I'm not sure if I realistically could have carried on much longer without having to go onto bed rest.

My experience of multiple birth

My twins were delivered by caesarean, 2 beautiful girls. They were smaller than I thought they would be but fantastic weights for twins a month early – one was 6lbs 3oz and the other 5lbs 15oz. The operation went really well, very calm, and I found it a very positive experience even though it wasn't what I wanted. I recovered well, I think because I was quite fit after my pregnancy. The only thing that took time was driving again. I could pick up both babies, push the buggy, etc, almost straight away.

Caring for twins

I am breastfeeding both the girls. It took about 4 weeks to get the hang of but now it seems like second nature to all of us and much easier than preparing hundreds of bottles! I've had an enormous amount of support and I'm not sure how you would cope without this. It is very, very hard work. I'm not sure I'd really thought about this much as I'd been so focused on getting pregnant and then being pregnant!

Establishing a routine was crucial and we have stuck with this. It's taken me a long time to get the confidence to get out and about with the two of them. I got quite worried about feeding when I was out, especially if the other one is crying for food, but I'm a lot more confident with this now.

It's certainly a bit of a strain on the finances but then we have been in 'beg, steal and borrow' mode from finding out about the pregnancy. It's lucky there are lots of great charity shops around here!

I have good support in place: my mother and mother-in-law help out during the week, and a neighbour's daughter helps in the early evening once a week. Everything seems to take twice as long as it did before and getting anywhere requires a military operation. However, the girls are so beautiful and I count my blessings every morning I go in to wake them up for the day. Each week gets easier and I get better at juggling caring for the two of them.... I have to say, looking at parents of one baby, that would seem like a doddle now!

I've certainly found that I'm extremely tired – but what new mother isn't? Sometimes when they are both crying and being fractious, looking after them seems like an enormous task, but the benefits of seeing them both smile at me from the cot in the morning far outweigh the negatives.

Making the decision to have treatment is often really hard, especially if your infertility is 'unexplained'. Once you step onto that road it's very difficult to go back. I was very conscious that if the three attempts we agreed to go for didn't work, then that would be it for us. I think people believe this is some kind of easy option but that is far from the truth. All of this certainly contributes to how you approach your treatment cycle. I always saw multiple birth as a bonus not a risk – I wasn't desperate for that outcome but if it happened, I was ready for it. We had long discussions about this prior to treatment and I think that influenced our approach a lot. At the end of the day I had a great pregnancy, good birth and we have two healthy babies, but I realise this isn't always the case with multiple pregnancies.

My twin pregnancy was an incredibly positive and life-affirming experience for me. I was proud of my body in the end that it had managed to carry two babies, nearly to term and without any serious issues. I'm still proud of my body for being able to produce enough milk for 2 hungry girls. After 5 years of waiting, I still count my blessings every morning when I go into the nursery and see those 2 little babies side by side in their cot. I can't wait to watch them grow up and see them blossom.