

Amy's story

I am 36 and my husband is also now 36. After a year of trying for a baby, we started doing the basic tests through our GP (NHS). My hormone levels were fine and my husband's sperm was fine too. We were encouraged by these results so we carried on trying a bit longer.

In March 2007 I was referred to a fertility clinic where we had all the same tests and again, they were fine. Months passed and the clinic did a hysterosalpingogram (an X-ray test in which x-ray visible dye is passed through the uterus and fallopian tubes to check that the tubes are not blocked) and the results of that were fine too.

Treatment begins

In June 2007 we had our first IUI (intrauterine insemination, where sperm is inserted into the womb at the woman's most fertile time) at the fertility clinic privately, which cost £780. At that point they suggested another IUI but I was keen to move forward to IVF as I just felt that there was something wrong.

In September we had our consultation at a large infertility treatment centre. Although they were thorough, we felt that at that point the doctor we saw was really going through the motions. We had a holiday and as soon as we came back they did a monitored cycle (where the clinic carries out various blood and ultrasound tests to determine the timing and dosage of fertility drugs) and everything was good to go.

IVF treatment

In November 2007 we were started on the long protocol. (This is where IVF is carried out over about six weeks and includes two distinct stages – first down-regulating (stopping your natural cycle) and then stimulating egg production. In contrast the short protocol takes only about four weeks and stimulation drugs are started immediately with a natural period).

My FSH (Follicle Stimulating Hormone level) was 8.9 so was considered fine for my age and I started sniffing (down-regulating by nasal inhalation of a nasal spray of fertility drugs such as Buserelin).

About five friends that have been through IVF had warned me about the headaches etc, but I was one of the lucky ones who felt absolutely fine. I started injecting on about day 5 and went for my second scan a few days later. At this point staff at the treatment centre realised that I did not have an awful lot going on follicle-wise, so they upped my dose considerably.

To cut a long story short I had to inject for 16 days, most of those days I was on 600 Gonal F and I also took Clomid for 5 days.

Egg collection and after

We had numerous scares that the centre would cancel the cycle but we persevered. At egg collection we had 8 eggs collected (one of which was immature).

The day after egg collection we were very excited about the call from the embryologist. I cannot describe how devastated we felt when they told us that *none* had fertilized, even though my eggs and the sperm looked fine. We spent the day crying and at this point I really thought our fertility journey had come to a very premature end!

I had no idea that IVF could be cancelled at any point. I always thought that you just injected yourself and they got the eggs and transferred them to you. I was completely in the dark about all the hurdles you can encounter on the way, and believe me, I have managed to hit a few of them!

The total cost of this cycle was around £9000. We had to pay for the full price of the IVF even though we did not get to transfer and also we had a lot of drugs this round.

I have to say, the staff at the treatment centre were brilliant and we were given a follow-up in two days. They explained that in their experience, total non-fertilisation only happened to less than 10% of couples and that hopefully the problem would be overcome by ICSI (intra cytoplasmic sperm injection).

Further treatment

I was extremely keen to do another cycle as soon as possible, just so that I would know whether or not we would ever get fertilisation. Until I knew this I was a bit all over the place. So in January 2008 I went back to the treatment centre for my first scan, only to be told that it could not start that month because I had a cyst! I was extremely upset as I knew that to wait another month would feel like a lifetime.

In February 2008 I was put on the short protocol and once again I was on 600 Gonal F (no Clomid was needed this time). It was extremely smooth and quick: I could not believe it when they rang me on my way back from work one day to say you need to trigger (inject with HCG – Human Chorionic Gonadotrophin – to stimulate ovulation) that night. It had only been 10 days. I am also lucky that the drugs don't make me feel ill and also egg collection has been fine both times.

A step forward

This time the treatment centre collected seven eggs (one immature). The following day we were up at 5am. The centre called at 8.30am while my husband was out walking to calm his nerves. I will never forget him running up the stairs with the news that *all 6* had

fertilised with ICSI. Honestly, it was the best news ever! At that point I really did not care whether or not I got pregnant that cycle: I was just so relieved to have fertilisation!

We did a 5 day transfer with one good blastocyst and one OK one. The 2 week wait was pretty bad. As much as I had thought that I did not care about the outcome, I suddenly realised that actually I did! I went back to work after four days and 9 days later we did a digital test at home (I was convinced that I was not pregnant). When the test was positive we could not believe it. It was weird as I really was not convinced. Stupidly we had no other tests in the house and because it was a Sunday we had to wait until 11am before we could buy some more. We bought a well-known brand but when I did the test, only a faintish line was showing, which halted our celebrations.

Assessing the results

After my blood test the next morning we got the call from the treatment centre. They said "You are not NOT pregnant but you aren't pregnant either." Basically my HCG level was only 21 and they told us that it was highly unlikely to turn into a viable pregnancy. However, I would still need to continue with blood tests. The next day my HCG level was 37, the following day 88, 2 days later 279, 2 days later 707. Although we had started the week feeling very pessimistic, when it reached 707 we started to feel maybe it might work but 2 days later it had only risen to 840 so it was all over.

The cost of this cycle was around £8000: the blood tests I had while I was pregnant added about £400.

Although we were extremely disappointed, we were also really optimistic about how far we had come. We had achieved fertilisation and had got pregnant! Also the injections had only been 10 days which made it much easier at work. I have a mobile job so I had to keep driving to the treatment centre daily and sometimes twice daily, pretending I had appointments. This was quite stressful in itself...

Another IVF cycle

We had two months off and I had a hysteroscopy (where a doctor examines the inside of the womb, using a small telescope inserted through the cervix), costing £1,000. They discovered my cervix was a centimetre longer than most (this would be useful to know during embryo transfer).

We started full cycle number 2 in June 2008. I was on 600 Gonadotropin F for 10 days and Clomid for 5 days. They collected 5 eggs (one immature). Only 4 were fertilised with ICSI. Two were transferred on day 3: 1 x 8 cell and 1 x 9 cell, both top grades. I had 5 days off work and felt really optimistic. However, a home pregnancy test gave a negative result. My husband and I were devastated: much more so than when I had the "chemical" (non-viable) pregnancy.

For this cycle we sourced our own drugs, saving £1,000, so the total cost was around £7,000.

Treatment costs

We underwent another IVF cycle – the total cost of this was £12,000. The ICSI treatment cost £4,500 and we again saved by sourcing our own drugs: they were about £1000. However, we had daily blood tests whilst undergoing ovarian stimulation followed by beta level tests costing £2500. Other drugs came to around £1000. I also had 2 rounds of IVIG (intravenous immunoglobulin G treatment, in which the woman is injected with human-derived antibodies) during the final IVF cycle, which cost a total of £3000.

Latest news

We started our latest cycle in September 2008. We had the short protocol again and had 9 eggs collected of which 7 were mature enough to use. Only 3 fertilised and I was very disappointed at the time. We had 2 x 8 cells transferred at 3 days: one was Grade 1 and one Grade 2 (embryos are graded by a professional embryologist). I was given the usual cocktail of drugs: Clexane, Gestone, Cyclogest, and Thyroxine. I also had IVIG the day after the embryo transfer.

12 days later I had an HCG level of 81, which was then tested every other day. I had a scan at 5 weeks and 6 days when they could see the sac, yolk and foetal pole, but no heartbeat. Two days later my HCG levels had not doubled so the treatment centre booked me in for a scan at 6 weeks and 2 days. Lo and behold, there was a heartbeat!

I also had another round of IVIG the following day. I am booked in for another scan when I will be 7 weeks and 4 days pregnant.