

Maria's story

From the age of 17 or 18, I had very bad periods, but my GP seemed uninterested. At 21, I had emergency surgery for appendicitis and awoke to discover I had also had an ovary removed, due to a large cyst. Although I had a histology (examination with a microscope of tissue removed during surgery), endometriosis (condition in which endometrial cells, which normally line the uterus, implant around the outside of the uterus and/or ovaries, causing internal bleeding, pain and reduced fertility) was not diagnosed until much later.

After the operation things seemed OK until I was about 28. I had two really bad periods on the trot. I hadn't had anything like that before and had to take a few days off work due to severe bleeding.

At the time my sister had just given birth to naturally-conceived twins, so I went to see her gynaecologist instead of my GP. She was lovely and said it sounded like I might have endometriosis, but that she could only know for sure by doing surgery. Six weeks later I took a week off work and had the surgery, and we discovered she was right. I then found a new GP!

Treatment for endometriosis

Despite taking medication intended to suppress the endometriosis, after six months nothing seemed to be improving, so I quit my job and took 15 months off. I had a further four keyhole surgeries with a surgeon who specialised in endometriosis. My uterus was inverted and everything inside was glued together because of the endometriosis, so we hoped the surgeries would both free it up and stop it being so painful.

After four operations the doctor induced menopause for two years, using HRT patches to counteract the side effects of hot flushes. My gynaecologist also suggested I see an osteopath and a homeopath regularly to help me feel normal.

When I was 29 I started a new job. While I was there I met my future husband. I always told him from the very beginning that there was a chance I might have problems conceiving. I didn't have periods as they were so painful, so I had been on the Pill continuously for a while.

First fertility treatment

Within a year and a half we knew we wanted to get married, so we had a number of tests done to see what our potential was to conceive. One of the tests showed that my one remaining fallopian tube was completely blocked, so we knew that IVF was our only chance of conceiving.

My husband-to-be had to do a sperm test which thankfully was fine and I had a monitored cycle, which involved internal scans and blood tests. We got married in September 2000, and my husband and I gave up drinking right after the wedding to be in the best possible shape for the IVF. We also both saw a nutritionist. She prescribed all sorts of vitamins and minerals to boost our fertility and ensure we were as healthy as possible before starting the IVF.

We chose not to tell anyone except my sister (both my parents had passed away many years before) and our bosses at work. It was quite an exciting secret to keep and we were fortunate that my gynaecologist was a very positive person and had never said it would never happen so

I was always very positive that we would get through it. We managed to have most of our appointments very early with minimal disturbance to our jobs.

We decided to start over Christmas as we both had some time off work, so I started using the daily inhaler which suppresses all your hormones and then started daily injections. This was one of the hardest parts for me as I became a bit squeamish about the injections. My husband was great and used to do them with me.

I also struggled as the injections to stimulate the eggs made my endometriosis really flare up, so the scans and internal examinations were incredibly painful.

We went to our treatment centre to have the eggs removed, and three days later (Valentines Day!) went back to have two of the embryos transferred. I found the transfer so painful that I was in floods of tears.

Pregnancy and birth

Two weeks later we went to have a blood test done and they told me my hormone level was "very high", which meant I was pregnant. I was ecstatic, and we just couldn't believe it had worked the first time.

Three weeks later we had a scan and they said it was twins! We were so excited and desperate to tell everyone. We knew we had to wait so went on holiday during my 12th week and then came back to have a scan done. We then spent the rest of the day on the phone telling everyone we knew. Everyone at work was amazed. I was left very swollen after the IVF so I was surprised no-one had said anything, especially as I was very slim at the time!

My pregnancy was uneventful, and was followed by a planned c-section, as the first baby was breech, at 37 weeks. I gave birth to the twins: a son and a daughter.

Further fertility treatment

We always knew we would try again. We had about 6 frozen embryos, so at the beginning of 2003, I came off the Pill to try to get my cycle ready for the frozen embryos.

It took months to get a regular cycle, which was really frustrating. Eventually, following treatment with a herbal remedy I was given by the nutritionist I had been seeing, it suddenly seemed to fall in to place.

The day we were going to the hospital to use the frozen embryos I was in the bath when the phone rang. My husband answered the call and came in to tell me that the hospital had said that none of the embryos had survived and that we should not come. Any doubts I had had that I wanted to try again vanished as I burst into tears. At that moment I knew how much it had meant to try again.

We went straight to our doctor to see if we could try a cycle of IVF that same month. I remember running round madly trying to get the prescriptions sorted so I could start it. This time round I found the injections much easier and didn't even use the auto-injector.

Also, this time they sedated me for the embryo transfer as I had found it so painful the first time.

A second multiple pregnancy

Amazingly, IVF worked for us again, and again I found I was pregnant with twins. By this time I felt slightly more daunted as I knew how much hard work twins are, and that my son and daughter would be only two and half years old when they were born. At least we had all the gear!

I haemorrhaged twice and had a horrible pregnancy as I had a placenta previa (where the placenta attaches to the wall of the lower part of the uterus, over or near the cervix). My younger twins were born 5 weeks prematurely. After 2 weeks in special care they came home and our family was truly complete!

Caring for twins

It has been hard work, my husband helps more than most dads I know, but we wouldn't change a thing.

The younger twins are age 4 now, and the older ones are 7. Last year I had a hysterectomy, so there won't be any more. Sometimes people see us with two sets of twins and say, "God, that must be awful!" They feel so sorry for us, but my husband and I look at each other and say, "Actually, we feel very lucky!"