

Rachel and Leigh's story

After ten years together, Leigh and I bought our first home and got married in 2011. We met at university and we felt we had had our time together just as a couple: now we wanted to extend our family. Trying to conceive started out as fun; it felt like a lovely secret that only we shared. But after a year of no joy, we decided to have some tests done to check all was well. Unfortunately, several issues were highlighted between the two of us, and we feared our journey to parenthood would not run as smoothly as we had hoped.

In 2013, I had a laparoscopy to remove a polyp (growth) in my uterus and to check everything else was in working order. Apart from mild endometriosis which explained my years of painful periods, nothing else was amiss. However, the previous tests had shown I had a low anti Mullerian hormone (AMH) level which means I have fewer eggs in reserve than I should for my age (early 30s). Suddenly I felt a lot more pressure in terms of time. Combined with Leigh's low morphology (slightly more misshapen sperm than average) and motility (they were a little lazy), we knew we would have a struggle.

In September of that year we started fertility treatment, a cycle of intrauterine insemination (IUI). This involved many hormone injections for me and several internal scans to show the growth of the follicles that would release eggs to hopefully be fertilised. A specially 'washed' sperm sample is delivered direct to the uterus via a catheter, in the hope that an egg is fertilised. We were hopeful, as finally we felt we were in with a chance with medical science on our side.

The treatment did not work. Nor did the next cycle, or the next. Four unsuccessful IUI cycles and almost a year later we felt exhausted, emotionally drained and extremely low. We each were carrying our own fears and disappointments, and for the first time in our relationship we found it difficult to talk to each other. As often happens stress became a catalyst for change; we both broke down and sought counselling, where we were able to verbalise our unhappiness and frustration, and finally talk to each other about the pain we were in, and what to do next. We decided to have a long break from treatment, to mend our hearts and minds and let my body recover from all those hormones. We also decided to 'come out' about our situation to our wider group of family and friends, something we personally found to be a good decision as the support we have received has been unbelievable.

In August 2015, we began IVF treatment. Many people who have not experienced this have assumptions about what it entails, but few really understand the complexities of the process. The hormone injections are the same as IUI but the process often takes longer, and the procedure is more invasive. However, after hearing so much about IVF in the media, I found the experience to be much less gruelling than I expected. That cycle we had two three-day embryos transferred to my uterus, but sadly in October we discovered this too had not worked. We were disappointed but we knew we were strong enough to go through it all again. To our surprise, family and friends donated the money for a second cycle (all previous treatments had been on the NHS) and by March this year we found ourselves booking our next IVF treatment. On May 15 we had two good quality five-day embryos called blastocysts - the best in terms of cell development - and on May 27 to our shock and delight we had a positive pregnancy test. Fast forward to June 15, we had our first scan and to our even greater shock we were told we are having twins! Both embryos implanted and can be seen clearly on opposite sides of my womb, so they will be non-identical. I have a subchorionic haematoma which is a blood clot in the womb, sitting between our two babies, and have had a lot of bleeding which has been terrifying. But a second scan showed both babies are still in there with strong heartbeats; fighters just like their parents.

We knew we would not carry on having treatment indefinitely, but we have been lucky. We still have a long way to go and we won't feel completely happy until our twins are in our arms, but after five years we finally have our miracle.

My advice to those preparing for or going through fertility treatment is to do what is right for you. Other people will tell you never to give up, but this isn't practical or fair. Somewhere a line has to be drawn and you have to move on to the next phase, whether it is adoption, surrogacy or a decision to be happy as two. Whatever you decide, no one else can ever truly understand your needs, so never feel guilty. We have been very lucky, and we want others to know there can be a light at the end of the infertility tunnel; sometimes two.