



# Fertility Hurdles on the Journey to Parenthood

By: *Nicole Mitchell*

The journey to parenthood should be an exciting and joyous one, but for the more than 6 million women dealing with infertility in the U.S, that journey can feel isolating and hopeless.<sup>1</sup> The decision to start a family is one that should not be taken lightly, which makes it all the more difficult for those who wait, for one reason or another, only to find out that they need some help in making this dream a reality. Like many couples, my husband and I began our partnership in blissful ignorance of the numerous issues that can plague fertility.

## **This is My Story**

Just after our second wedding anniversary in 2010, John and I decided we were ready to start a family. We hadn't considered that our fertility health could present a problem, but after we struggled to conceive, we consulted our doctor. After 10 months, five doctor visits, and multiple invasive tests, our reproductive endocrinologist prescribed fertility medications. However, we soon learned that my body was reacting too well to the prescribed medications, causing other issues. This was not necessarily bad news, but it meant we were no longer candidates for lower-intervention options.

The next part of our journey towards parenthood involved the much more invasive, time-consuming and costly process of in vitro fertilization (IVF). I can't say that I didn't shed a few tears when I realized this next chapter would be anything but easy, but we had wonderful support, as well as an amazing team of doctors and nurses who wanted nothing more than to see us through to our goal of parenthood. And so we began the process of IVF in hopes of a successful embryo transfer.

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## **Understanding IVF**

In vitro fertilization (IVF) involves retrieving eggs from the ovaries to be fertilized in a lab. The healthiest one or two embryos are transferred back to the uterus. This requires about three weeks per cycle and can take multiple cycles.

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## **The Dreaded Wait**

After an embryo transfer, there is a long, anxious wait to see if the hard work has paid off. Ten days after a transfer, a blood draw can confirm whether the pregnancy hormone is detected. Unfortunately for us, the first cycle did not result in a pregnancy, nor did the following two. Something wasn't adding up for our doctor and our hearts had now been broken three times in six months.

The hurdles to getting pregnant were adding up. In addition to the polycystic ovaries, partially blocked fallopian tube and anovulation my body was dealing with, I was also then diagnosed with pre-diabetic insulin resistance. The first three attempts likely failed because my eggs were affected by the insulin/glucose imbalance.

I was put on medication and a strict diet for a few months in the hopes of getting my body back on track. While I couldn't raise a glass for my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday and forgot what sugar tasted like, I did lose 20 pounds in under three months. Most importantly, this diet helped achieve a natural pregnancy. Although it ended in a miscarriage, my hopes were renewed that I could

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<sup>1</sup> [Office on Women's Health](#), Infertility

get pregnant. Another cycle went off without a hitch, and I was pregnant with twin boys by January of 2015. We were elated that our dream was coming true, and I was relieved that, by having twins, I may not need to repeat the difficult process.

That feeling of elation lasted about five months until complications arose with my pregnancy. No doctor could tell me why, but I was going into pre-term labor at just six months pregnant. I was put on bedrest and told to essentially cross my fingers that I could hold onto them long enough for their little bodies to grow and become viable. Two weeks later, on June 15, 2015, Brady James and Carter Vincent made their entrance into this world. They survived big hurdles early on, but quickly declined in the NICU. Not 24 hours later we were holding both of our boys as we said goodbye. The happiest and saddest moment of my life, and I could do nothing but tell them I loved them and apologize for not holding on longer.

Amid the heartache, I knew I didn't feel physically right and asked my doctors, more than once, if the way that I was feeling was normal. Perhaps chalking it up to the grief that was my new, childless reality, my complaints were dismissed until my heart was racing, my skin was jaundiced, and I couldn't catch my breath. We later discovered that I had a partial placental abruption—where the placenta separates from the uterus. This had caused the pre-term labor as well as internal bleeding. The day that we lost Brady and Carter was a day that my husband could have also said goodbye to me. I had lost a lot of blood, but after IV fluids and a blood transfusion, my vitals began to improve.

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*"I want to try again" was one of the first things I muttered to my husband that next morning.*

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With tear-drenched cheeks and a broken heart, I knew I needed to continue my journey. For fear of being judged, we kept that to ourselves for a while. Six years later I still hesitate to write this as I wouldn't want

anyone to think that the twins were that quickly forgotten or that we weren't grieving their loss with all of our tired, broken souls. Trying again was how I coped. It was my drive and my focus.

### **Fast Forward: January 2016**

Almost a year to the day after the twins' embryo transfer, we had a successful single embryo transfer! Hurdle one: cleared. The due date of our rainbow baby would be almost the exact date their brothers were due – this meant every milestone along the way fell at the exact same time of the previous year.

Anyone expecting after a loss, no matter the situation, understands the roller coaster of emotion this can be. I spent every doctor visit on edge, watched every scan like a hawk and overanalyzed every word – I spent a good deal of time waiting for something to go wrong. There were things done this time around, however, to try to give us a better outcome – this included additional visits to a maternal fetal medical doctor (MFM), additional cervical scans and weekly progesterone injections.

The day that I reached 23 weeks and two days gestation was a tough one as it was when the twins were born, but I made it to full-term and breathed a small sigh of relief as we cleared another hurdle. My baby boy, Cameron Beau (C&B for his late brothers and Beau as a play on rainbow baby) was born, and overdue at that, on October 25, 2016. Healthy and happy, and all ours to take home.

The interesting thing about fertility is that it can change. Having a baby can jump start the system of a previously struggling female just the same as it can undermine a previously fertile one. And we found that out firsthand when we became pregnant naturally in late April of 2018.

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*Could fertility be this simple? Is this what other couples get to experience and seemingly take for granted?*

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This euphoria was, like many so many other points in this story, short-lived as a six-week scan showed a possible issue with the baby's heart rate. After two weeks, suspicions were confirmed that there was a problem and our baby would not survive. I was sent home to go about my life knowing that I was miscarrying for a second time and that we would not be introducing Cameron Beau to a baby brother. Genetic tests would show that our baby boy had Trisomy 18, a life-threatening chromosomal condition associated with abnormalities in many parts of the body. And just like that, another hurdle we never knew existed would need to be cleared in future pregnancies.

Feeling incredibly defeated and also very much alone at this point since we hadn't shared the news with many folks about this pregnancy, we went back to our life as a family of three. We had two embryos frozen awaiting our hearts, minds and bodies to be ready, but I needed more time.

That summer we decided we would try another round of IVF in October, but we were pleasantly surprised (and only slightly terrified) that we were pregnant again, naturally, due in July of 2019. Continuing the hurdle analogy, we were at the starting line staring down a long 400 meters. This baby girl (yes our first girl!) cleared every last one. Chloe Rae (another rainbow baby reference) was born on June 20, 2019.

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*Six and a half years later, our family was complete.*

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Throughout this journey I have learned so many things and have made it my own personal mission to end the stigma attached to infertility, raise awareness of pre-term labor and birth, and to just tell my story in the hopes that others struggling know they are never alone. I can't say that I believe things happen for a reason, because what reason would there be for Brady and Carter's first day to be their hardest day? But I do believe that their existence has changed me. The more I can help others, the more I also somewhat selfishly help myself through their loss. Telling my story may bring tears to my eyes, but being able to say their names and forge their memories heals my heart.

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Infertility can be frustrating and isolating, but you don't need to shoulder it alone. If you're struggling with infertility, your healthcare provider can share local resources and support information. [RESOLVE, the national infertility association](#), also offers many resources, including information, events and tools to connect with others. They host an [online support group locator](#). While every journey is different, there is help and support available no matter your situation.

If you're supporting someone struggling with infertility, recognizing this uniqueness of their experience is important. Take care not to minimize their difficulty. Statements like "it's bound to happen!" may seem hopeful but can be disheartening and increase feelings of powerlessness. Above all, kindness during a difficult time can make a big difference.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Psychology Today](#), "Supporting a Friend Through Infertility"