

A deadly urge to itch

Kerry assumed her scratching was a normal side-effect of pregnancy...

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My husband Terry and I were thrilled. It was my 20-week scan and we'd just discovered we were expecting a boy. We decided to name him Jack. He was our first baby and it seemed like a textbook pregnancy. At 27 I'd had no trouble conceiving, and apart from morning sickness, I was fine. So was the baby.

But soon after that I became itchy – all over my body, but especially my legs. I assumed it was just something that happened in pregnancy. I wouldn't have mentioned it to my midwife, except at my 24-week check-up I was scratching nonstop.

'We'd better get that looked into,' the midwife said, arranging a blood test the same day.

When I got home there was already a message from the hospital asking me to call them.

A nurse told me I had a condition called obstetric cholestasis, or OC, and needed to see a consultant.

I came off the phone and wept. My perfect pregnancy wasn't so perfect after all...

Next day the consultant explained OC was a liver condition that only occurred in pregnancy. It caused a

high level of bile in the blood that could cause stillbirth. It was so scary.

But the doctor said that as long as I had the baby before 38 weeks, I should be fine. I'd be monitored closely too.

I was given drugs to reduce the bile and stop the itching. It was a hot summer, so I slathered on calamine lotion. But I still scratched my legs till they bled. I had a fan next to the bed too, but I was unable to sleep – terrified we'd lose Jack.

Eventually though, at 36 weeks and six days, Jack was safely delivered by Caesarean, weighing



With Izzy and Terry

almost 9lb. Five months on, I was still breastfeeding him when I discovered I was pregnant again.

This time I was prepared for OC, and sure enough, I got it. I yearned to talk to other sufferers but no one I spoke to had even heard of it.

Lily was also born early by Caesarean. Our boy and girl made our family complete.

But when Lily was five I found

out I was pregnant once more. And at five months I was diagnosed with OC again. Yet, this time, I found an online support group and chatted to other women with the condition.

It made all the difference, being able to compare experiences.

After Izzy was born – early and by Caesarean – at the end of last year, Terry and I went to the support group's Christmas ball.

For us it was a celebration of our children's lives. But many other couples were in tears.

The evening was a sombre reminder that some women hadn't been referred or treated in time to save their babies' lives.

● Kerry is donating her fee for this article to OC Support.

KERRY'S CONDITION

What is it? **Obstetric cholestasis (OC) is a liver condition that occurs in pregnancy. It causes a rise in toxic bile salts in the mother's blood and increases the risk of the baby being stillborn.**
Symptoms The first noticeable symptom is itching, without a rash, typically on the hands and feet, but it can occur anywhere on the body.

Who gets it? Around 5,000 pregnant women in the UK suffer from it every year.

Causes The precise cause is unknown but the condition can run in families and is linked to pregnancy hormones.

Treatment Regular blood tests and scans to monitor the baby's health, and medication to improve the bile acid levels. Most hospitals will want to deliver the baby before 38 weeks.

More info OC Support at ocsupport.org.



Lily, Jack and Izzy

3 TO TRY

HAY FEVER SOOTHERS



Murine Hayfever Eye Drops, £4.99 for 10ml (available nationwide)

Easy to use, and our tester said the drops helped soothe that irritating prickly feeling in the eyes.

Nasacort Allergy Nasal Spray, £5.06 for 30 sprays (available nationwide)

This worked well to relieve our tester's itchy, runny nose – and it didn't run down the back of the throat.



Qu-Chi Band, £10.99 (qu-chi.co.uk)

Our tester tried this acupressure band, worn on the elbow, and found her symptoms were more under control.

