

Hyperemesis Gravidarum: my experience

It was a much wanted pregnancy. Despite suffering from bad morning sickness and a brutal labour with my first child, I always saw myself as a mother of two children. It took time for us to get there, but once we did we became excited at the thought of it. When the two pink lines appeared on the test, the usual feelings of nervous anticipation coupled with fear took hold. Would the baby be healthy? Would we manage with a newborn and a toddler? How would our first born cope with the big changes ahead? What I never considered was whether I would even make it through the pregnancy.

Nausea and hyper-salivation kicked in at 5 weeks pregnant, both features of my previous pregnancy so I was expecting them. As unpleasant as they were, the symptoms made me feel reassured that the pregnancy was hopefully progressing healthily in those precarious and delicate early stages. I was feeling happy. I was enjoying my job and spending time with my toddler and felt excited about my little secret. Life was good. The day I turned 6 weeks however, everything changed. I woke up and couldn't move. It was that immediate and that debilitating. I felt like I had been hit by a bus and was convinced I had the flu. I couldn't leave the sofa and remember my daughter begging me for some toast but I lacked the strength to stand up and make it for her. I watched the hours tick by painstakingly slowly willing the time to pass so that my husband would get home from work and help me. I had no back-up childcare in place on my non-working days. I would just have to

get through as best as I could. Surely this would only last a few days?

My appetite vanished that day and I began retching and vomiting regularly. I had heard of hyperemesis gravidarum not just because of the duchess of Cambridge who inadvertently helped to raise awareness through her own suffering, but also because my mum had suffered from it in three pregnancies. Growing up, my sister, brother and I heard many horror stories of her experiences of continuous vomiting and weakness, hospitalisation, hiding pills under the mattress because she was too afraid to take them, doctors telling her it was in her head or that it was her subconscious telling her she didn't want the pregnancy, and finally being told she would have long lasting and irreversible hip damage from months of recumbency and muscle wastage. We had heard so much about it and yet the reality of what she went through hadn't really sunk in. After all, surely it wouldn't happen to me too? I hadn't had it the first time around so why now?

A week after the sickness began I admitted defeat. There was no way I could work like this and certainly no way I could care for my child. And yet still at this stage I was in denial. It would be a couple of weeks and then I'd feel better, I told myself. It was just bad morning sickness coupled with some sort of flu bug. I was lucky enough to get extra childcare help from my family and I was signed off work for 'vomiting' but was determined to return the following week. I went to the GP and was given anti-sickness medication. I was so scared to take it at that early stage for fear of what it might do to the growing

foetus. I frantically looked up papers and studies and read any information I could on pregnancy sickness and the possible teratogenic effects of the medication. Eventually however I had to give in. The meds made me deeply drowsy- even more so than the pregnancy itself which had already given me narcolepsy. I lay like a corpse for days and days, which turned into weeks and weeks. I sipped tiny bits of Coca-Cola through a straw and vomited up to 15 times a day. The nausea, hyper-salivation and fatigue were so unbearable it was easier just to sleep all day to pass the time. Some days there is no doubt in hindsight that I needed hospital care. But even the idea of moving out of bed into a car and waiting in A&E to be admitted seemed an impossible task. And who would care for my toddler if I was admitted? I called the GP every week (I was too ill to go to the practice myself) and more medication was added in. I didn't leave my house for over a month at one stage and even then it was to walk to the end of the street, vomit on the pavement and walk back again. I felt like I was dying.

Two months later I was still signed off work and unable to function. I had been bedbound for the majority of this time. I tried to stay positive but it was impossible not to let the dark thoughts creep in. 'I am blessed. Many women dream of being pregnant. I should be grateful. I should be grateful....' But I didn't feel grateful. I felt resentful and sad and low and extremely lonely. I didn't know anyone else who had this. My other pregnant friends were managing their symptoms and still going to work and functioning like I had in my first pregnancy. Was this all in my head? My daughter hadn't spent any proper time with me for weeks having been her main carer previously.

She didn't understand what was happening and was starting to lash out with frustration. My work place was being as understanding as possible but how could they possibly grasp the full extent of what I was going through? My husband was trying his best but working full time plus taking over all the childcare and household duties and supporting me was taking its toll on his own health. A fleeting thought came to me in my darkest moments: it would be easier to terminate the pregnancy. It would all be over. I would be well again and able to be a wife and a mother and do my job and be myself again. I wouldn't have to endure another day, another moment, of feeling this way. The thought subsided and then the guilt set in again. I wanted this baby. Why couldn't my body just get through it? Why wasn't I stronger? Why couldn't I just feel well again? Would I ever feel well again?

On one of the grimmer days when I lacked even the strength to lift my head off the pillow my sister suggested I join a hyperemesis support group on Facebook. I did so and cried tears of joy as I read through message after message from brave strong courageous women who were experiencing the exact same symptoms that I was. Finally I could engage with some empathetic people who understood the despair this condition can lead to. Some women had been trying for a baby for years and had undergone multiple rounds of IVF but despite this felt completely unconnected to the growing life that was finally inside them because of the extent of their illness. Many women were reaching out for help to cope with the mental strain the sickness puts on you, on your marriage, on your family. And others were wanting support through the dark days

following a termination they hadn't wanted but had felt forced to have because of the severity of their HG. I spent hours every day reading and replying to messages and feeling a deep sense of camaraderie and kinship with these women I had never met that saved me from an almost certain circumstantial depression. A friend also pointed me towards a charity called pregnancy sickness support (PSS) which was founded specifically to help women suffering from severe pregnancy sickness and hyperemesis gravidarum. Their website provides a wealth of information about the cause of and treatments available for HG and many support networks including an active forum for sufferers, a live chat service and one to one peer support. They even provide information for employers and partners/family members of sufferers. I couldn't believe it. No one was recommending ginger biscuits or suggesting that the sickness would pass soon or that every pregnant woman feels this way. No one was belittling or undermining or judging. There was only support, kindness and education to help people understand that this is a serious and dangerous complication of pregnancy. Just knowing there was help out there was such a relief.

When I was twelve weeks pregnant and my first scan went well I felt relieved but still rather numb. The midwife confirmed I still had ketones in my urine- a sign of the malnutrition that had preceded it- but at least by then on three different medications the vomiting frequency had reduced somewhat. By 15 weeks when the nausea and fatigue were still unrelenting and my throat and oesophagus had become raw and bruised I couldn't help but feel incredibly disappointed. The 'glowing' second

trimester obviously was not going to happen for me. I sat in the GPs room and sobbed. I wanted to be a good mother again. I wanted to be a respected colleague, not a flakey unreliable one with a series of sick notes. The doctor reassured me that I was being strong and coping admirably but I didn't feel that way. Why couldn't I just enjoy some of my pregnancy? It seemed so terribly unfair. I managed to go back to work on reduced hours though still required frequent days at home when my bone-aching fatigue prevented me from getting out of bed. As the weeks continued to pass and I saw the baby wriggling around at my 20 week scan and then started to feel her movements, I finally felt a little more positive. It served as a good reminder of why I was feeling the way I was. I wasn't dying after all, I was growing a new life. It will be worth it in the end, and it won't last forever, I told myself.

And finally here I am. Plodding onwards one day at a time, heading towards my third trimester but still crushed by the weight of a giant foot. Perhaps lately though the heel has lifted marginally to let me breathe a little. A benign acceptance has now washed over me as the realisation began to dawn that I will not rediscover a convincing version of my former self until after my baby is born. Maybe I will never get back to that person again. But I will have made another person and that ultimately makes it all worthwhile. It has to.