



# The PREGNANCY ITCH

**Amy Sparkes** explains how she coped with obstetric cholestasis during her three pregnancies

'I suffered from obstetric cholestasis (OC) in two previous pregnancies so when I was expecting my third baby I was looking out for the symptoms, in particular "the itch". OC is a liver disorder that occurs during pregnancy where the flow of bile from the liver is reduced, leading to raised bile acids in the blood. A common symptom of OC is itching and, for me, it was at its worst on the palms of my hands and my ankles.

'In my previous pregnancies I had often scratched so madly I would bleed. The only way I could sleep at night was with wet, cold flannels draped over my feet. Itching sounds like such a mild problem, but the frequency and intensity of it, especially when it keeps you from sleeping, is far from mild.

'I knew from my previous pregnancies that liver function tests and bile acids should be done early in pregnancy. I also knew itching can occur without any increase in the blood test results and,

because of my history and symptoms, that I should have blood tests regularly.

'But, despite my symptoms, my hospital was reluctant to do a bile acid blood test (the best test to diagnose OC). They insisted that OC is a condition which only presents in the third trimester, but I knew that it can actually start as early as the first. After repeatedly

voicing my concerns, and with the backing of my liver consultant, I finally managed to get a bile acid test at 18 weeks, which came back at 14 (normal levels are 0-14).

'I was really disappointed when the hospital then refused to do further bile acid tests



Amy Sparkes with her baby girl

until I reached the third trimester. I felt let down but I was so exhausted from lack of sleep and stress that I didn't have the energy to fight anymore. When my bile acids came back at 24 weeks they were

**'I scratched so madly I would bleed... More research and funding is desperately needed'**

over 100. I was put on Ursodeoxycholic Acid to reduce the levels and help the itching, but then told there would be no more blood tests to monitor the condition.

'Many hospitals manage this condition by suggesting induction at 37-38 weeks as research suggests

the risks to the baby increase after 37 weeks. But I was told my hospital would not consider induction despite my bile acids being so high.

'The following weeks were very stressful and I couldn't help but feel concerned for my baby. Finally, at 35 weeks, I decided to transfer to another hospital. There I was given amazing care - foetal heart beat checks and blood tests twice a week which enabled us to monitor the condition - and I felt far more reassured. I was eventually admitted for induction and I'm delighted to say my baby girl arrived safely at 37 weeks.

'Now I spend time on the OC Support UK forum helping other pregnant women. It can be hard for people who have never experienced "the itch" to understand how awful it is. I know when I was suffering that talking to someone who had been through it - and survived - was a tremendous help.

'More research and funding is desperately needed to discover more about the condition and to find out which OC babies are at risk and why. Every OC family should have the happy ending we did.'

## RESOURCES FOR YOU

**Find more information online:**

[www.ocsupport.org.uk](http://www.ocsupport.org.uk)

[www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk)

[www.nct.org.uk/pregnancy/obstetric-cholestasis](http://www.nct.org.uk/pregnancy/obstetric-cholestasis)

**If you've had a challenging experience of pregnancy, birth or parenthood, call NCT's Shared Experiences helpline on 0300 330 0700 for information and support.**