
OC - MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

By Alice Tuson, NCT St Albans

Obstetric Cholestasis (OC) is a liver disorder that occurs during pregnancy. It has impacted my life as both of my pregnancies have been complicated with this condition. Here is my personal story and further information on OC.

My experience with OC began with my first baby, Thomas, in 2008. I had a normal pregnancy until 33 weeks but then at night, I would notice how itchy my legs were. I thought it must be my pyjama trousers or perhaps I just didn't notice any itchiness in the day as I was busy at work. Anyhow, the itchiness seemed to become far more noticeable especially on the soles of the feet. I mentioned it to my midwife (a friend had had OC so I knew itchiness was something to mention).

I had blood tests done immediately and the results were elevated. It was then that I shared that my mother had a stillbirth (no known cause) and because of this I was sent over immediately to the day assessment unit at the hospital, where they did liver function and bile acid tests every few days as well as CTG monitoring of the baby and a scan.

At 37+6 weeks, when I was being monitored, the registrar was not happy with the baby's heartbeat trace - they were worried he was showing some signs of discomfort, so they admitted me immediately for induction. I was lucky and the

induction went very well; just one pessary and he was on his way!

With my second baby, Erin, in 2010, I had blood tests regularly throughout the pregnancy. I didn't feel I had any symptoms (although I now realise the cramps that started at around 30 weeks were actually right upper quadrant pain which can be associated with the condition) and my bloods remained normal. At my appointment with the midwife at 36 weeks, I said I was going to relax and stop worrying about developing OC (there is a 60 - 90% chance you will get OC in subsequent pregnancies) but she suggested I get 'one' last blood test.

I went to the hospital feeling that it was a hassle but to my real surprise my blood levels were elevated. I was then at the day assessment unit just about every day for a week. It was surprising how itchy I became over that week: all over, especially at night and far worse than I remembered. I then had some very bad right upper quadrant pain so I went straight over to delivery suite. I was admitted immediately at 37+1 weeks. My baby girl arrived safely after another successful induction.

With both pregnancies I experienced the last few weeks as a time of feeling very anxious and unwell, but I'm so thankful that my babies are both healthy and that's all that matters. The care I received in both pregnancies was, on the whole, fantastic, but I remember with sadness one registrar who didn't

believe OC was a serious condition. This led me to become determined to help raise awareness of OC.

Below is some information on OC, but if you are ever worried, see the links below or please don't hesitate to email me at:

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What is Obstetric Cholestasis (OC)?

Note: it can also be referred to as Intrahepatic Cholestasis of Pregnancy (ICP)

OC is a liver disorder that occurs during pregnancy. It affects up to 1% of UK mums to be. It is a condition in which the flow of bile from the liver is reduced, leading to raised bile salts (also referred to as bile acids), in the blood.

What are the symptoms?

- ◆ Pruritus (*itching* without a rash) – that can be *mild* or *so severe* that women may scratch their skin until it bleeds. It can be constant or intermittent and it typically affects the hands and feet but *may occur anywhere on the body*. It is usually worse at night and therefore disturbs the woman's sleep.
- ◆ Other symptoms that may occur include: pale stools, dark urine, pain in the top of the right hand side of the abdomen (this is not common) and jaundice: yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes (this is also not common, affecting less than 20% of women with OC).
- ◆ It is also not uncommon for women to feel generally unwell, tired and to lose their appetite.

What are the concerns / risks?

Concerns for the Mother:

- ◆ OC can be a distressing condition for the mother but the symptoms will resolve soon after the baby is born.
- ◆ So far, there is no evidence to show that it has any long term affect on women's health except studies indicate that gallstones occur more commonly in women who have had OC and there is now some thought that women with OC are predisposed towards developing metabolic disease such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease; researchers are just beginning to study this.

- ◆ There is a small chance that some women will bleed heavily following delivery, but treatment with oral vitamin K may prevent this (although there is absolutely no evidence to support this).

Concerns for the Baby:

- ◆ OC has been reported to be associated with an increased risk of spontaneous premature birth, fetal distress, meconium staining and in severe cases, stillbirth.
- ◆ Most hospitals choose to monitor women with OC more closely and to deliver the babies early (between 37 and 38 weeks) in order to minimize any risks.
- ◆ It is important to note that with active management (which usually means treatment and choosing to deliver early) the risk of stillbirth in an OC pregnancy is believed to be the same as for a normal pregnancy (1%).

There is no evidence to show that there is any long term effect on the baby after having OC.

How is it diagnosed?

- ◆ To make the diagnosis of OC, other liver conditions need to be ruled out first with either blood tests or liver ultrasound scanning.
- ◆ Blood tests: Liver function tests (LFT's) look at how well the liver is working by measuring levels of different enzymes. Bile acid test – this test is believed to be the most specific test for OC.

What is the treatment?

Unfortunately there is no cure for OC, but there are treatments available that are aimed at relieving the itch. Some may also help to protect the baby, such as Ursodeoxycholic Acid, although this drug still needs to be clinically evaluated through a large random controlled trial.

Where can you get more information about OC?

www.ocsupport.org.uk (FAQs, information leaflet, birth stories)

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk (search for 'Obstetric Cholestasis')



Jenny Chambers who founded OC Support UK has approved all of the content in this article. See the OC Support UK website for details of their helpline. There is also a downloadable leaflet on both websites.