

How a cousin's chance remark saved my baby



■ Emma with Oliver and Matthew.

WHEN mum-to-be Emma Holt from Gateshead suffered an itchy hand during her first pregnancy she saw it as just a persistent irritation.

She didn't realise it was an indication of a serious liver condition that could have resulted in her losing her baby.

And only a chance remark led her to seek advice and get the medication and early delivery that made sure baby Oliver, now two-and-a-half, was born safely.

But Emma was struck down again with the condition, ICP, during her second pregnancy with little Matthew, now six months old.

Thankfully, both her babies were well. However, ICP has been responsible for many tragic stillbirths and Emma is now working to raise funds and awareness.

"It started with an itch on the palm of my hands when I got to 28 weeks in my first pregnancy," 23-year-old Emma says.

"It was horrendous, like an itch under your skin that can't be scratched. Nothing will ease it.

"I mentioned it to a cousin who told me her friend had been itching during her pregnancy.

"She was sent to her midwife and this liver condition was discovered.

"I'm a nursing assistant and I'd never even heard of it.

"I still thought the itch would go away and it was only my cousin pushing me that made me get it checked out.

"Otherwise, to be honest, I'd have turned a blind eye."

When Emma spoke to her midwife she was immediately told to come along for blood tests which confirmed ICP.

She was told she'd be put on medication and that her baby would be induced early.

But Emma's own research into the condition and the increased risk of stillbirth filled her with worry.

And the debilitating effects made the remainder of her pregnancy really tough.

"Some days I felt so drained I wanted to stay in bed," she explains.

"You just feel so unwell.

"Even though Oliver was thankfully born fine, the whole experience and the fear that it'd happen again and there was

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this risk of losing the baby, put us off having more children. But I fell pregnant again and it was a real worry.

"The thought that you could have a miscarriage doesn't let you enjoy your pregnancy."

Just as medics had warned was likely, Emma was indeed hit by ICP again with the itching starting at 16 weeks.

She was being regularly monitored and it was only at 32 weeks that the blood tests confirmed things.

The levels were even higher this time and Matthew, who weighed in at seven pounds, was again induced early.

As well as the increased early medical intervention, Emma was also helped by the charity ICP Support.

Such was the backing she has been actively fundraising for the charity recently.

"I've done a couple of events already and have another planned for their awareness week that starts on March 1," adds Emma.

"I know a lot of people don't know about it and how it's treated can depend greatly on where you live.

"That needs to change as there have been some awful tragedies."

ICP, Intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy, is the most common liver disorder specific to pregnancy.

■ It affects around 5000 women a year in the UK and is known to be passed down through families.

■ Itching may be the first sign and two blood tests — liver function and bile acid — confirm diagnosis.

■ ICP is associated with fetal distress, spontaneous preterm labour and, in severe cases, stillbirth, so drug intervention and early delivery of the baby are recommended.

■ In future pregnancies the risk of recurrence is up to 90%.

■ For further support and info visit icpsupport.org

