

Sarah's Story

I discovered I was unexpectedly pregnant on the pill at 23. A whirlwind of emotions ensued but within a few days I had gotten used to the idea, told our family and my best friend and was ready to immerse myself in the whole pregnancy experience

At 5 weeks 6 days I woke up feeling like I'd been hit by a truck. I couldn't swallow my own saliva without gagging and every time I moved my body waves of nausea engulfed me. I was lucky that I was on a week's holiday from work and had some time to adapt. I recognized it as morning sickness and, sure enough, it eased as the day went on. Until one day it didn't.

Night time was worst for me. I vomited more than 20 times from about 4pm every evening until the wee hours. Just enough time to let me go to work, hide my pregnancy from colleagues and crawl into bed every day as soon as I got home. I tried everything. Sea bands, dry crackers, eating little and often, GINGER! Ginger biscuits, ginger tea, raw ginger. Nothing helped. At my worst, I was eating only lemons to stay hydrated. The only relief I got was in the bath for some reason. A hot bath made the vomiting subside and the nausea manageable. But I couldn't live in the bath!

I went to my doctor around 10 weeks. Sick of coping alone and sure that this wasn't normal. He tested my ketones.

"Normal levels" he said. "You're just unfortunate. But sickness is a part of pregnancy for many." And he sent me on my way with instructions to follow the BRAT diet- bananas, rice, applesauce and toast. I was too shy and inexperienced to tell him that I simply couldn't keep anything down. I later learned that he was reluctant to prescribe anything to pregnant women for vomiting- a hangover from the thalidomide scandal.

Luckily, the vomiting eased slightly at this point and I was managing 1-2 meals a day. Mainly brown bread and cold noodles. I became unintentionally vegetarian- the mere thought of meat was enough to make me sick. **But the nausea.** Nobody talks about the nausea. Getting sick didn't help. It was unrelenting. There were days where I just didn't want to wake up and go through it all again. And I mean that exactly how I said it. **I did not want to wake up.**

I work in a school and summer holidays came around when I was about 3 and a half months pregnant. I spent that summer in bed. I couldn't bear to be touched. Speaking and moving made me nauseated. The smell of my partner's skin made me retch. To this day, men's shampoo and deodorant makes me gag. I didn't seek any medical help again, convinced that this was just what happened to some pregnant people and I had to ride it out. I made passing references to the sickness at hospital appointments but I didn't want to seem melodramatic. I had heard of hyperemesis gravidarum thanks to Princess Kate, but told myself this couldn't be it. That's a serious condition and the doctor told me this is normal.

I gave birth to Joshua in December 2014. Thankfully the HG had become reasonably manageable a few weeks before birth so I didn't have to suffer it during labour. It was there, but I was so used to it at that stage that I didn't even notice it. That tea and toast was the

best thing I ever tasted. I know everybody says that, but it was the first meal I enjoyed in 9 months.

Fast forward nearly two years and we became pregnant again. Planned this time. I had convinced myself that it surely wouldn't happen again. I found out I was pregnant at 10 days past ovulation. Every morning that I woke up feeling ok was a small victory. Maybe I'd get lucky this time. Maybe it was a girl and I wouldn't experience HG with a girl. I was so hopeful.

My almost 2 year old caught his first tummy bug a few days later. It was horrendous, lasting over a week. Our family caught it too, so when I woke up one night vomiting I genuinely thought it was a tummy bug. Until it didn't pass. 5 days, 6 days, a week. Then smells started to bother me. A lot! I could smell everything. Everything made me nauseous. And I knew straight away that it was back. I was exactly 5 weeks pregnant on the first day of my "tummy bug".

We had to tell family straight away so they could help care for my toddler. **Within days I was vomiting over 30 times a day.** I tried syringe dropping water into my mouth but it didn't work. I quickly became dehydrated and went to my doctor at 6 weeks. She was new to the practice and instantly diagnosed HG. I was sent to the Rotunda immediately for rehydration, where I waited all day for a bed. I slept on the waiting room chairs until a midwife took pity on me and let me lie on an unoccupied bed in the assessment unit for a while.

Eventually it was decided that I would be kept in overnight. I was given something to stop the vomiting and was able to keep down meals and water, once I didn't move from the bed. They wanted to keep me in a second night as my ketones were taking longer than expected to stabilize. But as I had a toddler at home, I asked to be let home. They were reluctant but agreed. I was told to come back in the next time I felt I was getting dehydrated. From experience, I knew this was going to be within a few days.

Having researched HG between my pregnancies, I was much more familiar with treatment options, even though most of what I could find online seemed to be based around the UK. But, ever optimistic, I asked about Cariban. The doctor gave me the prescription so easily that I wondered why he hadn't suggested it himself! So off I went on the search for this miracle drug. It proved harder to find than I expected, as it had to be ordered in specially. But a miracle drug it was! And I'm so thankful for that as I know it doesn't work for everybody. The cost was horrific. I can't even remember it now but it was at least €150 a month. I tried to reduce the amount of tablets I was taking per day, just to make the pack last longer. But all that led to was incessant vomiting again.

I still had to take sick leave from work until I was 14 weeks. The Cariban reduced the vomiting to about 5 or 6 times a day, but the nausea remained for the moment. I had food aversions galore. For a period of about two weeks, all I could stomach were apples and the milk leftover from a bowl of coco pops. And the Cariban knocked me for six. I was on 4 tablets a day and the longest journey I could make was from my bed to the couch. I slept about 16 hours a day in the early weeks of taking it. I would start talking and then trail off as

I hadn't the energy to finish a sentence. I lost about two stone, dropping to 7 and a half stone for the first time since I was 12. But by the time I was 14 weeks I was fit enough to work again.

I was lucky this time around. The Cariban made eating tolerable and I managed a lot better than I had first time around. But still the nausea clung on tight. Again, baths were my only relief.

I weaned myself off Cariban around 26 weeks- my third attempt. I think the nausea began to wane naturally around then and I enjoyed my last trimester, despite SPD and continuing food aversions.

By the time I gave birth to Finn in August 2017, I was sickness-free! I may have relished the feeling too much and tended to overeat a lot. So much so that I was wolfing down risotto in between contractions, much to the amusement of everybody!

We have no immediate plans for another baby, and my two boys are the best things that have ever happened to me. But **a HG pregnancy is hard**. It makes you question whether or not your baby is worth all this pain. And it is pain. As much as any other illness. **It makes every day a struggle**. Even now, I am terrified when I catch a bug, as I am reminded of how it felt back then. I cannot wait for the day that we find out for definite why it happens and how we can control it. You cannot describe HG to somebody who has never experienced it. All they hear is "morning sickness". All they suggest is ginger! **At times it feels like you are actually dying**, that the next time you close your eyes you won't wake up. More than anything, I want to understand why. A cure would be the best thing, but an explanation would help us to go on. To conceive again without fear.