

Feature



Paul Cook is now a dad to twins Otilie and Felix following a struggle with infertility

Picture: GEMMA COOK

'After we found out we were expecting twins, it felt like we had won the lottery'

A Lowestoft dad with 'miracle' IVF twins speaks out after struggling to conceive - and a fertility expert provides tips on how to help your chances of conception.

By **Danielle Lett**



An often taboo subject, fertility is an issue that affects tens of thousands of couples up and down the country. According to the NHS, around one in seven couples experiences difficulties when it comes to conceiving.

One man who understands the perils of trying for a baby all too well is Paul Cook.

Lowestoft-based Paul and his wife Gemma were living in Houston, Texas, thousands of miles away from their Suffolk hometown, when they began to suspect they had fertility problems.

"At times we felt really alone living so far away and with no close friends and family around," Paul says.

The pivotal moment came five years ago when Paul arrived home from work to find Gemma in floods of tears after yet another negative pregnancy test result.

"I saw how devastated Gemma was and I decided we needed to take action. We had some tests done which revealed we would be unlikely to conceive naturally, so we took the decision to move back home to Lowestoft to be closer to family and decide on our next steps."

Upon arriving back in the UK, the couple went to see their GP who sent them for more tests. These tests confirmed Paul had a poor sperm morphology (shape).

With every month that passed, he soon felt that time was slipping away from them.

"I felt completely helpless through the whole process. It was out of my control and no matter how much I tried to console Gemma, it didn't make the pain

and the emotions any better. At times I would feel as though it was my fault and that I couldn't give us the one thing that we wanted in life, which was to become parents."

As time went on, a series of overwhelming emotions washed over Paul every time he heard someone else he knew was going to become a dad.

"Having close friends announce they were expecting a baby while we were going through this process was one of the hardest things I had to deal with. I would be pleased for them but also envious, jealous and angry that they were getting so easily what we wanted so much. We felt as though we had been left behind.

"Social occasions often brought up awkward questions related to having children. People think it is an innocent question, but in reality, we were trying so hard for a baby that it broke our hearts when we were questioned about it. Although I was going through the same emotions of pain and frustration, I had to be strong for Gemma. Nothing was more important to me than making sure she was okay."

By speaking out however, Paul seeks to raise awareness of the emotional impact on the male partner when a couple struggles with infertility.

"We were very secretive about what we were going through as we felt that no one else could truly appreciate the emotional pain we were facing."

However, his feelings of guilt and needing to be strong for his partner are shared by many men, says independent fertility counsellor Jackie Stewart. She

Tips to help to boost your fertility

Concerns about fertility increased during the pandemic, according to fertility specialists at Bourn Hall. Being better informed can help ease concerns and help to gain the most appropriate support, says Laura Carter-Penman. Lead fertility nurse at Bourn Hall, Laura is on the frontline advising patients how they can improve their chances of pregnancy.

"Your GP is the first person to see if you are concerned about your fertility and have been trying to conceive for over a year, but the average GP only sees about six cases of infertility a year so they are not specialists. To make the most of your appointment, it is a good idea to do some homework first," she explains. Before heading to a GP appointment, Laura has a list of vital information you should take with in order to help pinpoint the problem. Give the age of both partners. Egg quantity declines after the age of 35 so age is a common cause of female infertility. Male age is also important as sperm

quality can reduce with age. Measure your height and weight to calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI). The recommended healthy BMI for men and women when trying to get pregnant is 19 - 26, so achieving this may improve your fertility which might be sufficient to achieve natural conception. Record your periods - if you have a regular cycle then this is an indication that you are releasing a mature egg each month. Keep a record of your periods, the date they start and the duration. Are they very heavy or painful? There are also ovulation kits that you can buy. Your GP can request a blood test to check your ovulation hormone levels. Mention any relevant family history. Did your mum have difficulties getting pregnant? Did she have treatment for painful periods? Did she have an early menopause? Was she diagnosed with PCOS or had suspected endometriosis? Be prepared to talk about sex. Ensure you are having unprotected intercourse two to three times a week for a year

before you go to your GP, as you will be asked about this. Don't worry about timing around ovulation - if you are having sex with this frequency you will hit the window when ovulation occurs. Be clear about any previous fertility tests. If you had previously been referred for testing and have some results then take these with you to the GP appointment. If no tests have been done, then you could request appropriate female fertility tests and a semen analysis for men. It may easiest if you both have the same GP. But first check first to see if either of your GPs provides funding for IVF treatment. There is currently a postcode lottery for IVF funding, and GP practices a few miles apart may fall under different policies.

Bourn Hall has a special mens-only Fertility Support Group meeting on Thursday July 22 to talk about conflicting emotions and how to support a partner. To find out more, visit www.bournhall.co.uk



runs the Fertility Support Group at Bourn Hall which is open to everyone going through infertility.

"Men can feel helpless and unhappy because they do not have the power to make it better, and this can increase their own stress levels. It can be likened to having someone living with you who is feeling unwell and fragile but there is nothing you can do," she says.

"Infertility is a grieving process. Men often try to be the rock for a partner, but it is better to just accept you are in this together and you don't know what the outcome will be. This way you can work out what you need individually and what you need together to help you feel more peaceful through treatment. This takes away any expectation or assumption that your partner should be feeling or coping the same way."

Eventually, things started looking up for the couple when they were told they could be referred for NHS-funded IVF treatment at Bourn Hall Clinic.

"We arrived at the clinic in Wymondham and they made us feel so at ease and comfortable straightaway," says Paul.

"By changing my diet and taking loads of vitamins, we were soon told my sperm had really improved which was amazing news."

The couple were entitled to two

NHS-funded rounds and eventually Gemma fell pregnant after their second course of treatment after they had ICSI (Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection). This involved the best quality sperm taken from Paul and being directly injected into Gemma's eggs in the lab.

"Getting the positive pregnancy test was one of the biggest feelings of euphoria that I have ever felt," says Paul.

"After we had a scan and found out we were expecting twins, it felt like we had won the lottery."

On April 18, 2019, the couple welcomed twins Otilie and Felix.

Expressing his euphoria at finally becoming a dad, Paul says: "Being a dad is the best feeling in the world. Knowing how hard we tried to bring them in to the world and now the love and joy they bring us every day is truly magical. The unconditional love I have for them is indescribable - they light up our world every second of every day."

"Being a father is everything I dreamt of and more. After everything we have been through, I am thankful every day and I do not take it for granted."

"If there is any advice that I can give to people going through infertility, it is to trust the process. The people and experts at Bourn Hall were all truly amazing and helped Gemma and I keep the faith."

Fertility struggles can have an emotional toll on both partners

Picture: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



DELIGHTFUL DEVON Weekend

Departing Fri 3 Sep '21

Beloved for its mild climate and miles of glorious shoreline, Exmouth in beautiful South Devon provides us with the perfect base for our relaxing break away. From here we explore this picturesque corner of the West Country, including a visit to stunning Exeter.

Your break includes

- ✓ Return coach travel from Bury St Edmunds
- ✓ 3 nights at the Ashton Court Hotel, Exmouth with dinner & breakfast
- ✓ Entertainment some evenings
- ✓ Excursion to Exeter

Optional excursion to Sidmouth (£9pp)

4 Days by Coach *only* £179

Single Supplement £45



BOURNEMOUTH & Isle of Wight by Hovercraft

Departing Mon 11 Oct '21

Home to seven miles of golden sands, Bournemouth offers a traditional seaside ambience. From our base here, we explore the charming Dorchester Market and the town of Weymouth. We also discover golden-sanded Ryde after taking a journey to the Isle of Wight by hovercraft.

Your break includes

- ✓ Return coach travel from Colchester
- ✓ 4 nights at the Heathlands Hotel, Bournemouth with dinner & breakfast
- ✓ Return hovercraft journey to Ryde, Isle of Wight
- ✓ Excursions to Dorchester Market, Weymouth & the Isle of Wight

Optional excursion to Salisbury (£12pp)

5 Days by Coach *only* £279

Single Supplement £60



ISLE OF WIGHT Weekend

Departing Fri 29 Oct '21

There is nothing quite like a breath of fresh seaside air, and with nearly 60 miles of unspoilt coastline, the Isle of Wight is the perfect location to rejuvenate and relax. This getaway offers a peaceful atmosphere and plenty of stunning scenery.

Your break includes

- ✓ Return coach travel and ferry crossings from Colchester & Ipswich
- ✓ 3 nights at the Burlington Hotel, Sandown with dinner & breakfast
- ✓ Entertainment some evenings
- ✓ Excursion to Newport

Optional Island Highlights tour (£13pp)

4 Days by Coach *only* £169

Single Supplement £45

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