

'We have overcome so much to have our family - just thinking of it makes me tearful'

September marks PCOS Awareness Month, and this year, one Suffolk couple explain how they overcame the odds to conceive not just one - but two - bundles of joy.

Sammy-Jo and Leigh Pipe, of Lowestoft, had only been together a few weeks when Sammy-Jo fell pregnant.

After the initial shock set in, soon followed a sense of elation - before sadness, as the couple unfortunately lost their baby. They then tried again for eight years without success - but were unsure why they couldn't conceive again.

Sammy-Jo, who started puberty earlier than the average age, recalls the pain she went through growing up - unaware it would later be diagnosed as polycystic ovary syndrome.

"I remember being in primary school and asking my mum if I could shave my legs when I was about eight. And my periods began when I was around nine or 10 - they were really heavy and painful, but they were regular until I put on a lot of weight.

"Later in life I met Leigh and, I got 'comfortable'. I wasn't really looking after myself, I gained

weight and then my periods became really irregular," she adds.

The couple got married in 2012, and just three months later Leigh was sadly diagnosed with testicular cancer.

"He was on his own when he got the news while I was at work. He phoned me and we were both absolutely devastated," says Sammy-Jo.

Before his operation, Leigh froze his sperm at Bourn Hall as an insurance policy, and in 2016 the couple felt ready to get to the bottom of Sammy-Jo's infertility problems.

She was then diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome - a hormonal condition affecting one in ten women.

It can often lead to infertility, with common symptoms including excessive hair, weight problems, and irregular periods -

but it is often difficult to diagnose.

In order to better manage her condition, Sammy-Jo joined a weight loss club and lost four stone. The pair also gave up smoking, allowing them to meet the criteria for NHS funding for IVF treatment.

"With the use of an ovulation tracking app, I realised that there was a direct correlation between my weight going up and the regularity of my periods. I started exercising, and I managed my carbohydrate intake because women with PCOS often crave carbs and sugar which can cause weight gain.

"We had also fertility tests. Leigh's sperm sample was low, but there was some there. The doctor said I was ovulating, but by this time I had lost weight. If he had done the tests before I lost weight, it might have been different."

The couple were referred to Bourn Hall for IVF - but sadly the first two IVF cycles were unsuccessful.

"That was when I hit my all-time low. I was in a really dark place and ready to give up. While I was 28, my sister and sister-in-law were on their fifth babies. It was just so hard watching everyone else get what you want and I found it really difficult to bond with their babies, but my sister said 'you must keep going'."

Third time was certainly the charm though, as the couple fell pregnant - but Sammy-Jo couldn't relax until baby Bodhi was born.

"We were driving home from the hospital and I said to Leigh 'My head is quiet, for the first time in about seven years. It was the most surreal moment.'"

After Bodhi's birth, Sammy-Jo worked hard to keep her weight under control and maintain her healthy lifestyle.

"When I'm healthy, I feel a lot better - I'm just a bit hairy! And my periods are regular, not heavy."

Bourn Hall fertility consultant Dr Arpita Ray explains that women with PCOS often have abnormal levels of insulin (the



ESX Sammy-Jo and Leigh are expecting another baby this month - and Bodhi cannot wait to become a big brother

hormone that controls sugar levels in the body), and high levels of testosterone (the 'male' hormone that often leads to more body hair and acne).

"Women with PCOS often find it difficult to maintain a healthy Body Mass Index (BMI) of between 19-25, and this can have an impact on fertility because being overweight or underweight affects the amount of insulin your body produces," she adds.

In a healthy female, a mature egg is released each month from a follicle in the ovary. If the egg isn't fertilised, the lining of the womb is shed during menstruation.

However, for women with PCOS, lots of follicles develop and the eggs are not released. Instead, the little sacs fill with fluid to look like cysts and this can be seen in a scan. The lining of the uterus thickens until eventually it is lost in a bleed. This creates the heavy period.

A regular menstrual cycle is therefore a good indication that a woman is ovulating. But by managing their weight, women with PCOS can become pregnant.

"If the weight gain is the only

reason why periods have become irregular then there is a good chance that by losing weight you will restart ovulation and become pregnant naturally. If you don't manage to conceive naturally, then becoming 'fertility fit' will also increase your chances of successful fertility treatment," adds Dr Ray.

Sammy-Jo and Leigh's next miracle happened just a few years later, and their second child, conceived naturally, is due this month.

"I went for a scan with this pregnancy and my ovaries looked normal, with no cysts. Whereas before, they looked like pomegranates.

"My advice for anyone trying for a baby is to get 'fertility fit'. If you have irregular periods, get blood tests to check you are ovulating. We have overcome so much to have our family - just thinking about it makes me teary. Being a mum is the most wonderful feeling in the world."

To find out more about fertility issues, PCOS, and IVF, visit www.bournhall.co.uk



Left, Leigh Pipe, baby Bodhi and Sammy-Jo. It took the couple eight years to get to the bottom of their infertility problems

Right, Sammy-Jo was unaware that PCOS was the reason she was struggling to conceive



Left, Sammy-Jo with Bodhi

Right, Leigh's testicular cancer diagnosis delivered another blow to the couple in their quest for a baby

Pictures: SAMMY-JO PIPE

