

The agony of MY IVF ADDICTION

Jessica Hepburn, 43, has the strangest obsession – and it's driven by the most desperate pain

Lying in bed, propped up on pillows, I took a deep breath and pushed the needle deep into my stomach. I winced as I watched the drugs empty into me. My skin was puckered and purple with unsightly bruises from the last four years of these daily jabs. Yet however much it hurt me, whatever harm I was doing to my body, I couldn't stop. It was January 2010 and I was suffering from the most terrible addiction – one that only a woman like me would ever understand.

Looking back, it seems hard to fathom how I could have ended up like this. Things had started so very differently...

By the age of 34, I'd become an executive director of a London theatre. I'd been brought up believing you succeeded in work before you thought about children. So it wasn't until then, when I was settled with Peter, a marketing executive, that we started trying for a baby – on Christmas Day 2004. It seemed a

magical date and of course we weren't worried when it didn't work, we simply spent the next weeks having fun together, hoping it would.

Only, after six months, I began to worry. Why wasn't I conceiving? I bought an ovulation kit and worked out my most fertile time. 'We've got to try for a baby now,' I told Peter whenever the 'right' moment struck. He took it with good humour at first but I grew more demanding, once phoning him on a business trip and saying he had to come home – now!

Finally, we went for tests. The depressing conclusion was that I had 'unexplained infertility'. In other words, there was no medical reason I wasn't conceiving. Yet it gave me hope it could happen. But it also meant there were no instant cures or quick fixes.

In July 2006, Peter and I paid £1,000 to try IUI, a procedure whereby my womb would be artificially inseminated with his sperm. But at the last moment, I panicked. 'This isn't how making a baby should be,' I sobbed. Peter took me home, and for the next year, we tried to make a baby naturally. Finally, in 2007, aged 37, I realised I didn't care how I got pregnant as long as it worked! I desperately wanted to be part of the elite motherhood club.

'I told myself it would all be worth it'

Whatever it takes

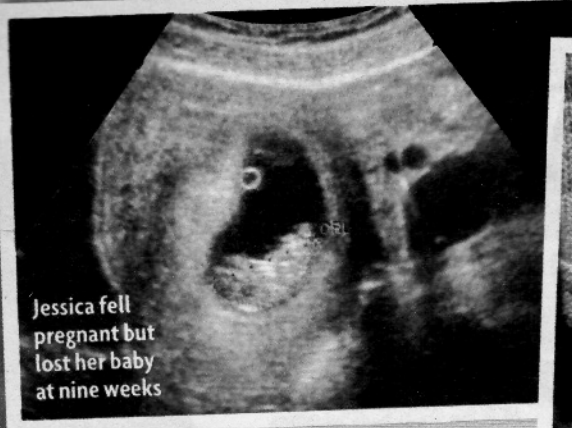
So we went to a fertility clinic, paying £6,000 for our first IVF cycle. The process was physically punishing – an injection to shut down my normal menstrual cycle, two weeks of daily hormone jabs to stimulate egg production, then invasive egg collection under general anaesthetic.

My body ached from the poking, prodding and drugs, my moods swang from happiness

to tears in an instant, but I told myself it would all be worth it. 'Science is going to give me a baby,' I thought. And two weeks after the health embryos were implanted in my womb, a pregnancy test showed positive. I was ecstatic but the nurse warned me not to be too hopeful. The pregnancy hormone was low. All we could do was wait and see. And after another two

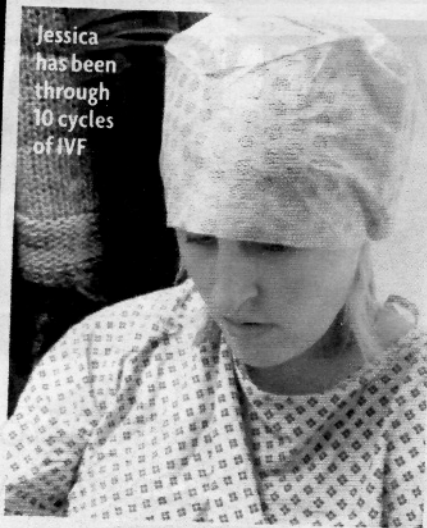
At 34, the age she started trying for a baby





Jessica fell pregnant but lost her baby at nine weeks

Jessica has been through 10 cycles of IVF



weeks, we experienced the greatest happiness. We heard the heartbeat and got a grainy picture at the scan. We called this wobbling, bouncing jellybean 'Mini-Molly', imagining we were having a girl. But just a week later, we lost her. It was spring 2010 and, aged 39, I suffered a miscarriage at nine weeks. The despair left me reeling. Peter moved back in and we tried to heal our relationship, but my 40th birthday was looming.

less at £2,000 as we used frozen embryos left from the previous cycle. It was still a lot of money but our jobs meant we had savings.

Yet that round of IVF failed, as did the two after that. My friends were becoming mothers and I could see them awkwardly edging round me. I hadn't told anyone about my IVF attempts. I felt slightly ashamed that I couldn't conceive. But they knew I'd always wanted children and guessed something must be wrong.

'I think we need a change of pace,' Peter said finally, so we moved to Oxfordshire in spring 2009, hoping that the country air and relaxed lifestyle might help. We found a new clinic and underwent our fifth round of IVF. That failed too. Only, three months on, I realised I hadn't had a period. It wasn't unusual, the IVF drugs meddled with my natural cycle anyway, but I took a test and it showed positive. After all my desperation, it had happened naturally. 'We've got our miracle,' I wept, phoning Peter at work. That day, I carried the positive test in my bag, checking it every so often. I was pregnant! The euphoria was immense.

My IVF consultant gave me an early scan. But then came the awful news – the pregnancy was ectopic. During the last round of IVF, an embryo had implanted itself outside my womb. I was three months gone and my condition was now life-threatening.

'I'm sorry,' was all the consultant could say as I was rushed to emergency surgery to have the foetus removed. When I came round after the four-hour operation, I broke down. How could life be so cruel? This was my darkest time, I was tipped over the edge into near insanity. My body swirling from the endless IVF drugs, I suffered volatile mood swings. My relationship with Peter began unravelling and although we embarked on more IVF, I felt unhinged. One night, during a furious row, I attacked him, hurling objects and pouring a whole bottle of wine over his head.

Long-awaited good news

In despair, he moved out, though he agreed to support me through the rest of the IVF cycle. Incredibly, this time I fell pregnant. For eight

I tried acupuncture and took supplements to boost my body as I had more IVF. I went on an anger management course and even visited a psychic. I still didn't fall pregnant and my chances of becoming a mum were growing slimmer.

More disappointment

Peter and I moved back to London where we turned to a new IVF consultant whose techniques had gained criticism but got great results. 'If anyone can get me pregnant, it's him,' I told Peter, convincing him the £12,000 price tag was worth it. I even took a sabbatical from work to focus on the treatment, and began writing a book about my experiences. Yet both cycles failed and I was left desolate once again.

You'd think I'd stop there, after nine physically and emotionally exhausting failed IVF attempts. But even though we'd remortgaged our home twice, spent our life savings and racked up debts to cover our £50,000 fertility bill, I couldn't. Like a gambling addict, I thought that next time would be it, the big win. But those brief glimpses of hope we experienced fed my overwhelming compulsion to have 'one last try'. So in 2012,

we went through a tenth round of IVF – a more natural kind that involved fewer drugs and was gentler on my spent body. But the £4,000 cost only added to our debt when it failed.

Now, two years later, I'm 43, and part of me thinks it's time to give up. Some might ask why haven't I tried adoption, but this is about my need to have a baby, to give birth. I started on that road and it's hard to suddenly accept a different route. In any case, I still have hope. We can't afford any more IVF at the moment, but if I was offered it tomorrow, I would jump at the chance. Because maybe, just maybe, next time it will work and finally I'll get my dream – to be a mum. ♦

♦ **The Pursuit Of Motherhood by Jessica Hepburn (£8.99, Matador) is out now**

'I felt so cheated and let down'

weeks, it was confirmed – there was no baby. I had had what was known as a 'biochemical pregnancy', or a very early miscarriage.

I felt so cheated and let down. Doctors tried to reassure me that at least I had got pregnant, and I decided to try again. First, I had to wait six months for my body to recover. Then Peter and I went back to the clinic, this time paying