



Maybe Baby

AN IVF JOURNEY

Maybe Baby

Not being able to have children - when it is all you want, more than anything in the world - is a dark and devastating place. I know, I have been there. Today I am sharing with you my IVF journey. Because I want you to know you're not alone. Those feelings are normal. And to never give up.

Alexia Purcell



Maybe Baby – An IVF Journey by Alexia Purcell

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Alexia Purcell

I was 20 when I met my would-be-husband. He was nine years older with two young kids and a vasectomy. At that time his vasectomy didn't mean anything to me. Ironically as a teen I used to say I would have babies "when I'm 30 and they come in a test tube". Looking back I have no idea why I used to say this. I didn't know the first thing about IVF then and clearly, IVF babies don't come in test tubes.

But needless to say, for the first five years of our relationship I didn't think twice about my husband's vasectomy. His little children became my little children and I just thought if we wanted more kids we could get his vasectomy reversed. Naive, I know.

A lot of people underestimate the finality of a vasectomy. My husband was young, 28 when he had his and really he probably shouldn't have. But many are led to believe you can just get a vasectomy reversed if you change your mind. The ads I hear for vasectomies on the radio make me really mad. Yes, vasectomies can be reversed but what a lot of people don't realise is there a time limit on the reversal.

It was almost 10 years since my husband's vasectomy when we decided we wanted to have more kids. So we went to see our doctor, who in turn referred us to an urologist.

The urologist was quick to point out after a few years the chance of a successful reversal greatly diminishes. Further, as sperm is produced what the body considers "outside", when a man who has had a vasectomy starts producing sperm again the body often releases antibodies to attack and kill it.

He told us to save our \$8000 (the cost of a reversal) and look at IVF because if his body did produce antibodies, which it most likely would, the next step would be to wash the sperm and go through IVF anyway.

So back to the doctor and this time we left with a referral for the local IVF clinic. Looking back I wish I knew more so I could have questioned things: why this clinic? Why this doctor? But weren't given any options. We were just told this is the clinic, this is your doctor, here you go.



Me – Alexia Purcell



OUR IVF PROCESS:

1. Low dose pill to regulate my cycle
2. Two weeks of twice daily Synarel spray (first three cycles), two weeks of once daily Orgalutan injections (last cycle)
3. About eight days of Gonal F (first two cycles) or Puregon (last two cycles)
4. Ovidrel trigger injection
5. Egg pickup and sperm retrieval
6. Embryo transfer five days later
7. Pregnancy test 10 days later

I remember that first consultation and crying in the car on the way home afterwards because I had no idea how we could possibly afford to do it. \$8000 stood between me and my dream to have my own children.

So of course my mother offered to lend us the money. We even took a photo of the cheque so we could print it on a onesie with the words: "My Grandma loves me this much" for the baby to wear.

We went to the clinic. We handed over the cheque. We started our IVF cycle.

When it came to my daily needles I used to lie on the couch with an arm over my head, teeth clenched, waiting for the sting. My stomach was black and blue from the bruises.

A few cycles later I learned an alcohol wipe held against the spot after the needle greatly helped with the bruising.

The drugs made me feel crazy. Or maybe it wasn't the drugs. Maybe it was the mental head stuff IVF does to you when you want something more than anything in the world and you don't know if you're ever going to be able to have it.

I was overly optimistic during that first cycle though.

We had all our scans and all our blood tests. Everything was looking good so we booked in our egg pick up and sperm retrieval for another \$4000 out of pocket.



On the day of our procedures I gave my husband a card that read: “Thank you for making a baby with me”.

Lying on the table I was all nervous excitement, thinking this was it. Not much longer and I would be pregnant. I remember joking with the staff that the drugs weren't working moments before everything went black.

They said when I woke up I would have the number of eggs collected written on the back of my hand. I woke up to find a 12.

We went home, both terribly sore and waited for a call from the scientist. It came a few days later and it was good news, five of our eggs had fertilised. We made jokes about having five children. They told me to come back in a few days for the embryo transfer.

When it came to the transfer I had already worked out when our baby was due. I remember I'd painted my toe nails this lovely blue for the occasion. The nurses even commented on them as I sat up in the chair, my feet in the stirrups.

Holding my husband's hand I expected pain but the transfer was painless, just a little twinge as they put the tube through my cervix.

I was given a photo of the embryo and a form for a blood test in a fortnight.

They warned me about the two week wait, how hard it is, but I didn't doubt it wasn't going to work. I was young – 27 – peak fertility age, they had told me. I'd been having symptoms, according to Google. I'd gone out and bought a cot.

*thank you
for making
a baby
with me
xx*

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I did the blood test and then had an agonising day's wait for the result. When the nurse called nothing could have prepared me for the fall.

Yes, I was pregnant but the hormone level was so low. She expected it wouldn't stick and could I have another blood test in a few days?

What did she mean, I was but I wasn't pregnant? You can't be a little bit pregnant? This is what I told myself to stop the tears.

A few days later I did another test. This time the day dragged on, every time my phone rang – and I'm a journalist, it rings a lot – I would jump, my heart almost beating out of my chest.

When the nurse finally called I knew from her voice it wasn't good news. I had no level of HCG anymore. I'd lost the embryo.

I fell apart. I was supposed to cover an event that night, I couldn't go.

A few days later we went back to the clinic to pick up the drugs for a frozen cycle and fork out another couple of grand for the pleasure.

We went through the motions and on the day they told us the thawed embryo wasn't looking so good so they'd gone to the liberty of thawing another one.

I only had five embryos. One hadn't taken, they'd just thawed two, one without our approval and the last two had been frozen together. My chances were running out. I remember breaking down in tears and saying to my husband we might as well look at adoption.

Back into the room, up in the stirrups, catheter in, two embryos transferred, here's your photos and a form for a blood test in a fortnight.

Another agonising wait. This time I was sure. I was having symptoms again. They were different but according to Google they were definitely symptoms. Twins! I was going to have twins.

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And then more bad news. I was in the car in the car park at my office this time when the nurse called. It's funny how you remember exactly where you are when your life is falling apart. All these little details.

After this my cycle was out of whack. Instead of getting my period every 28 days on the dot my cycle went to 30 days to 32 days.

I told the clinic and they said just to let them know when I was ready to try again.

So I spent the next six months doing weekly acupuncture sessions and taking Chinese medicine trying to get my cycle back to 28 days so I could have my last two embryos transferred.

The whole time I just felt like I was treading water – it was another obstacle to get over before I could reach my dream – that dream of getting pregnant.

Finally and another couple of thousand dollars later I'd got it back to 28 days. I called the clinic to organise our last transfer.

While on the phone they told me a changing cycle is normal with IVF. It happens. They can work with it by putting you on a low dose pill to regulate you. What? Why the hell didn't they tell me? I'd just wasted six months – six precious months. I was beyond furious.

We paid the frozen transfer fee. Did it all again but this time I had a really bitter taste in my mouth.

I knew after the transfer it didn't work. I knew before they even called. And that was it. It was all over. All our embryos were gone. We'd spent nearly \$20,000. We were still paying back my mum for the initial \$8000. We couldn't afford to do it again. We were broke and broken.

In between our last two cycles we had gone away to visit my husband's parents. While there we stumbled across an old school friend of my husband's living in the same rural road as his parents.

They invited us for a BBQ. We went. His wife offered me a glass of red wine. I'd stopped drinking years before the IVF to create the perfect environment for getting pregnant. But I thought what the heck and told her about our IVF.

Ironically they were also on a break from IVF but they'd just heard about this clinic in Sydney that provides affordability and accessibility for all, from his sister who was a nurse. Had we heard of Westmead Fertility Centre? No, no we had not.



So the moment I got the negative pregnancy result, less than a minute later to be exact, I'd called Westmead and requested an information pack. This was what held me together at this time. We'd just spent \$20,000 and got nothing in return. But now there was light at the end of the tunnel again.

Westmead's out of pocket cost for an IVF cycle was a staggering \$900*. We could afford to do another cycle.

*Hell, for \$900 we could afford to do it again, and again and again.
Until I Got Pregnant.*

A week later we conducted our consultations over the phone with one of their doctors.

A couple of weeks later we were on a plane, then on a train, making the journey to Westmead to pick up our medication.

I was nervous. That first IVF cycle had made me gun shy. I was no longer optimistic. I was desperate.



Not being able to have children – when it's all you want, more than anything in the world – is a dark and devastating place. It consumes you, it is all you can think about, you look at other people and think, "why can they have children and I can't?", you start questioning if there is a reason you can't fall pregnant, some divine intervention suggesting you're not fit to be a parent. The thoughts during this time are dark, disturbing and unhealthy.

This was where I was at when we arrived at Westmead for our nurses' appointment. I think I even cried during it. Actually, I'm sure I did. There wasn't many times I wasn't crying during this period.

But the nurses were wonderful. They talked us through everything, even though we felt like experts by then, albeit not by choice. They gave us our medication, information packs and said to call anytime with any concerns. Chris was especially wonderful and she would come to play a very important role in our IVF journey.

*This was the cost at the time (2012). Prices have increased since then.

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We headed home. We injected. We had scans. We tentatively booked in our egg pick, which didn't cost anything! But before we could book our flights back the nurses called me. Some of my follicles were overly large. A few 30mm in diameter. There was a chance if I took the injection to make me ovulate it could cause ovarian hyper stimulation syndrome (OHSS). And hyper stimulation wasn't something I should take lightly. It could lead to serious illness or death, they told me.

They left me to weigh up the options. I distinctly remember, walking up to the table in our back yard, shaking. My husband followed me. But I couldn't cry, I couldn't say anything. I just felt like I was falling into this black hole. I could see darkness skulking around the corners of my vision. I felt like I was having a breakdown.

Ovarian hyper stimulation syndrome (OHSS) is a potential threat for any woman doing IVF and can be mild, moderate or severe. Women who experience mild OHSS may feel bloated, nauseated, notice slight weight gain, mild abdominal swelling. In severe cases, fluid accumulates causing abdominal pain and reduced urine. Mild cases recover within 1-2 weeks. Severe cases can take up to 4-6 weeks.

My husband didn't want me to go ahead with the cycle. My health was not a risk he was willing to take. I didn't feel the same. I felt if we cancelled this cycle there was another couple of precious months lost. We'd have to wait for my next period which, would be 28 days exactly because they put you on a low dose pill – they don't muck around – then there'd be the weeks of drugs...it felt like it was all years away. I couldn't bear it.

But somewhere in that black fog I realised the enormity of the health risk hyper stimulation posed and how likely it was that I would hyper stimulate if I went ahead. The nurses were relieved when I cancelled.

And so began another wait. Because I couldn't control this I found myself trying to control all other aspects of my life. I'd get up first thing in the morning and work like a mad woman trying to finish things – unfinished painting jobs, cleaning, washing – I just needed to feel like I was achieving. Ticking things off. It made me feel in control. Controlling what I could control because I couldn't control what I wanted to control.

I obtained more IVF drugs so 28 days later it all began again. By now I was used to the needles. I didn't even flinch anymore. I actually enjoyed the little sting. It made me feel like I was getting somewhere – getting closer to my dream.



They'd significantly lowered my dose this time and I was required to have more scans to check my progress. The closest place I could have the follicle scans was at the IVF clinic we first went to. We were a bit loathed to go back but we needed these scans. And of course they charged us handsomely for them.

But it was while I was having one of these scans that I got the owner of the clinic. They knew we weren't doing our cycle with them so they questioned Westmead and couldn't believe it when I told them the out of pocket cost was \$900.

"They can't possibly take embryos to blastocyst for that cost," they'd said. But I assured them Westmead did.

A little while after that this clinic started offering a low-cost IVF option. I have always wondered if it was because of what I told them that day.

But affordable or not, I'd seen firsthand the difference between them and Westmead and there is no way I would have ever gone back.

My follicles reached perfect size – not too big but big enough – and quite a few of them. I took my trigger injection and before we knew it we were in Sydney and checked in to the Wesley Lodge across the road (they give you a discount if you're have a procedure at the hospital).

The next morning I was prepped and waiting to go in for my egg pick up. Unlike the first cycle where I had a general anaesthetic, Westmead only uses twilight sedation. I'm not going to lie, the egg pick up hurt. I felt every scrape of the needle, every prick to my ovaries as they removed my follicles, I can remember crying out: "It's hurting, it's hurting, it's hurting."

But it was over quickly. A six was scrawled on my hand and I was wheeled into recovery where you are given pain killers and later a cheese sandwich.

Meanwhile my husband had gone for his percutaneous epididymal sperm aspiration (PESA). Unlike his microsurgical epididymal sperm aspiration (MESA), where they cut open his scrotum and removed the sperm, his PESA was a simple and far less painful needle into the testicles to remove the sperm. It cost \$100 as opposed to the couple of thousand we paid for his MESA and he was able to come and collect me in a wheelchair from recovery immediately after.

He wheeled me back to the hotel and the next day we left for home.

Looking back on my two pickups, while it hurt under the twilight, I recovered a lot quicker than under sedation.

A few days later and one of the scientists from Westmead called. It was good news. All six of my eggs had fertilised and there would definitely be one viable blastocyst for a transfer. I booked more flights back to Sydney, this time with my mum.



We got to Westmead and donned our scrubs. It was back into a room, with a picture of a petri dish on a TV overhead and my embryo in it. Feet up in the stirrups - I stopped painting my nails three transfers ago - catheter in, embryo in, catheter out...the doctor gently tapped me on the knee.

“See you in nine months,” he said.

That was the first time in our IVF journey that I was given a tiny glimmer of hope. They told me my embryo was a grade B – excellent quality. The others weren’t, they weren’t going to bother keeping them. So with no other embryos I held onto the hope that this was it. That this was my baby.

They gave me a pack of pregnancy testers and the next day my mum and I were on a flight back home. For the next two weeks I didn’t look for symptoms. I took cold showers – even though it was the middle of autumn - as I’d been told embryos don’t like to get too hot. I tried to stay calm. I even went and did yoga.

Two weeks later the day for testing came around. I was so nervous I was shaking as I took the pregnancy test to the toilet but I was so relieved that I didn’t have to go do a blood test and then wait all bloody day for someone else to tell me the news. I was going to find out in – oh, two minutes.

I did the test, put it on the bench with a tea towel over it and then refused to look. I told my husband he had to – while I stood shaking in the doorway to our kitchen. I remember him going over, moving the tea towel out of the way and picking up our future.

“I don’t know what I’m looking for,” he said.

I was forced to cross the room then.

“You’re looking for two lines,” I said before I even reached him.

He turned to me, holding the test out. “What, like this?”



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I collapsed. He hugged me to him and we both cried.

My top tips:

1. Try and stay calm and even when you don't feel like it, force yourself to smile, those endorphins help
2. You're going to feel like crying and that's okay – your hormones are all over the place, your head is in another place and your heart is where it's always been
3. Talk to your partner or keep a diary to document how you feel
4. Don't Google - ever

Even writing about this moment almost five years later I am crying. I can still remember every detail, right down to the thumping of my heart, the shaking of my legs, the sun warm on my back through the kitchen window. And the knowledge there was a little being inside of me.

Looking back I definitely had symptoms this time. Sore boobs, heightened smell – but I refused to buy into them – until I knew for sure.

And then of course even though I had the two lines telling me I was pregnant I started questioning how pregnant? Would it be like that first time? Had it only just taken? Would I lose it?

They ask you to take another test a few days later. I remember the wave of relief when those two lines appeared again, stronger than before.

I can still see them. I still have my pregnancy testers. They live in the draw beside my bed and while the little windows have yellowed with age I don't think I will ever be able to throw them out. Yes, a little gross I know. But everything up until this point had been hinged on what those little windows had to show and I still, even now, get a thrill out of looking at them and remembering.

The first few weeks into my pregnancy and I was on cloud nine. I had never been so happy, nor so terrified. I wouldn't lift anything heavy, I wouldn't eat anything that could possibly put me at risk, and I still kept having cold showers, even when autumn turned into winter.



Six weeks in and my stomach was still a little swollen. I put this down to residual swelling from the pickup, hormones, hell – being pregnant. So when I woke one night to go to the toilet and collapsed with a stabbing pain in my abdomen, I had no idea I was hyper stimulating. Neither did the doctors at the local public hospital.

After being dropped off by the ambulance, they were baffled as to what was wrong with me. They thought it was my appendix. I thought I was miscarrying.

Even lying in that hospital bed, in so much pain I could hardly move I kept using a tissue to make sure I wasn't bleeding. I took solace from the fact I wasn't.

They put me on painkillers and a drip and the next day I was wheeled in for an ultrasound. My heart was beating harder than when I found out I was pregnant. Please let there be a heartbeat, please let there be a heartbeat.

I cried when the ultrasound picked up the four chambers of my baby's heart and its galloping heartbeat. Then my pregnancy felt real and so incredibly vulnerable.

They sent me home after that but I was back that evening. They put me back on the drip and pain killers.

A day or so later a doctor arrived in the middle of the night. He prodded my abdomen. There was a large lump on the right side of my bellybutton. It was my ovary. It was four times the size it should have been. They brought me scrubs. There was a chance it had torsion. They were going to operate. Would I lose my baby? I cried. Not straight away, they said, but most likely a few days later.

When my husband arrived in the morning I was a mess. Even though Westmead had called and spoke to the obstetrician in charge and told them I was hyper stimulating, the staff kept rotating and none of the doctors seemed to understand it.

They took me for an ultrasound to check the blood supply of my ovary. If there was no blood it had torsion and they would operate. I would lose my baby. End of story.

Thankfully the ultrasound showed there was still blood flowing through my ovary. This was our chance.

My husband called our gynaecologist and he simply said: "Get her out of there now." He organised all the paper work and a few hours later I was transferred to our private hospital.

I spent two weeks in hospital, much of it on a drip and then drinking copious amounts of fluid, and measuring my wee to make sure I was passing the fluid.



While in hospital I had another couple of scans. I held my breath before each one and only when the fluttering of my baby's heart appeared on the screen did I let it out in one big whoosh accompanied by a flood of tears. They gave me my due date: February 18, 2013.

I went home, baby and ovary intact and spent the next six months trying to stay calm all the while incredibly anxious and counting down the milestones.

The 12 week scan, the first time the baby moved – it was like bubbles popping in my tummy - the nuchal translucency scan and the result, the 20 week scan – no we didn't want to know the sex, thank you.

Just shy of 32 weeks I started having contractions. I remember lying on the couch and feeling this wave of tightness sweep up my stomach and then back down. Panicking I rang my mum.

"You're not going into labour are you?" she joked as she answered the phone.

"Actually mum, I am." She was around in minutes and racing me down to the private hospital.

They strapped me up to a monitor. Yes, I was having contractions. Lots of them and close together. But because I wasn't yet 32 weeks I had to go to a hospital that was equipped to deal with premature babies. I was bundled into an ambulance and whisked to Royal Brisbane & Women's Hospital on my own.

My husband was at work, my mother had offered to come but strangely I felt like I could do this on my own. Maybe it was everything I had already been through.

For the first time in the whole IVF process, my pregnancy – I felt strong.

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NOT being able to have children - when it is all you want, more than anything in the world - is a dark and devastating place.

It consumes you; it is all you can think about, you look at other people and think, "why can they have children and I can't?"; you start questioning if there is a reason you can't fall pregnant, some divine intervention suggesting you're not fit to be a parent.

The thoughts during this time are dark, disturbing and unhealthy.

I know. I have been there.

For three years my husband and I did round after round of IVF and

A story I wrote on our IVF journey was shared around the world



I got to Brisbane and they kept the monitor on me. I wasn't dilating but they gave me an injection to strengthen my baby's lungs just in case. A nurse gave me pamphlets on what would happen if my baby did come now. The chances of survival, possible health problems, spending six weeks after the birth at the hospital – and I fell apart again.

I just wanted my baby healthy. I didn't care what happened to me, I just didn't want anything to happen to my baby. I begged and pleaded for him/her to stay in. They gave me more drugs to try stem the contractions. And slowly, over the course of a few days they subsided.

On Boxing Day – after a tense and stressful Christmas in hospital – I was allowed to go home.

Threatened preterm labour is labour between 24 and 37 weeks gestation. Management includes:

- Monitoring baby's heart beat
 - Examination of cervix
 - Monitoring contraction timing and strength

Between 24 and 34 weeks two steroid injections to help improve the baby's lungs are given 12 hours apart.

Nifedipine, a muscle relaxant might be administered to help slow or stop labour these are not Braxton Hicks contractions. Braxton Hicks are a tightening of the uterus. They are usually painless.

I was an anxious mess trying to stay calm for the next eight weeks. When it finally came to it, when I started having contractions, we got to our hospital, got settled, went through a 24 hour labour and then ended up having to have an emergency caesarean because I hadn't dilated. I didn't care, I just wanted my baby out safely.

Even through the fog of exhaustion and the epidural I remember the moment my son was born. It was the greatest moment of my life. Until my daughter was born, almost three years later. These two memories now sit side-by-side, on par with each other.

When our son was two we decided to do another round of IVF. We didn't know how long it might take and while we felt so lucky and blessed with it happening straight away on our first cycle with Westmead we were jaded enough from the three years we'd spent doing IVF with the other clinic.

The procedure was much like it was before. Simple, easy, stress free and affordable. Again, we only got one viable embryo from our cycle but one was all we needed.



With nurse Chris kindly minding my son so my mum could be by my side, the doctors told me this embryo was a grade A. I burst into noisy, relieved sobs then joked it must be a girl.

After my late-onset hyper stimulation during my first pregnancy, our doctor this time had monitored me even closer again. And I knew what to look for this time.

Thankfully I went the whole 38 weeks without a hiccup. Unlike with our son, we found out the sex of our daughter at the 20 week scan. I couldn't believe it. I had hoped for a daughter but at the same time I would have been happy with another boy – I was just happy to be having another baby.

Every day I feel incredibly lucky. They are both amazing. They have completed me. I am whole.

Since our IVF journey I have tried to spread news of Westmead far and wide. Being a journalist, thankfully I have been able to do this.

A [story I wrote on our journey](#) for the company I work for has been shared around the world. I even received a call from a lady in Hong Kong asking me about Westmead.

I've seen stories about people struggling and have reached out to them personally. I've sat down with friends staring down the barrel of IVF and given them the steps and support I wish I had.

I just want people to have a little bit of what I have. And to tell them to never give up.

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