

## **Finding support and the “preterm baby village”**

Wow, we were having baby number three and had so much to look forward to. My girls were excited about being big sisters and I was looking forward to having a newborn once again.

Just after eight weeks pregnant, I had gestational diabetes which, for me, meant watching what I ate, injecting insulin and taking Metformin. I was also a pregnant relic so was on extra folic acid, aspirin and the dreaded clexane!

I was fairly chilled out though and had lots planned....and then along came the pandemic. After a couple of weeks of panic, I was chilled again, and the antenatal staff were really caring.

I had my usual appointments and extra scans. Then I was told baby wasn't growing too much as it seemed my placenta wasn't doing enough for my baby. Baby was due 7th June but after further scans it was decided to bring baby out on my birthday! Baby would still be full term. I was admitted to have steroid injections (ouch!) to boost baby's lungs and this also increased my glucose levels. My plan was to be in hospital for two days then go home for a day and night to see family and then go back in for the planned c-section.

I was dressed all ready to leave the hospital and then baby was monitored but his heart wasn't beating as much as it should have been. This was the start of my pre-term birth of my baby. I was 36+6 which is one day short of being classed as full term. For some reason this one day is a massive milestone in pregnancy yet it's something we cannot control. It's just a number and whether our babies are born vaginally or by c-section, naturally popping out or emergency, we are controlled by our babies, our bodies and also those in the medical profession.

For me it was the team of doctors, midwives and anaesthetists who surrounded my bed and whisked me off into theatre for what was a truly traumatic experience. I'd had 2 c-sections before and both had been different. One had been an emergency but I'd had a top up of epidural so was awake and felt in control. This time was like no other. As I'd had clexane the night before, I had to have a general anaesthetic so as to not lose too much blood.

My pre-term birth was not planned, it was traumatic and in the middle of the first lockdown. I tried to fight everything and everyone and it was a difficult operation. My baby arrived two days before my birthday, he was low in sugar and seemed to be good at needing light therapy for jaundice.

We had several challenges thrown at us and finally after a 10 day stay for me and eight days for him, baby Nathaniel finally got to meet his sisters.

Honestly, it was a hellish experience but it was lockdown which meant no visitors and once out, there were no support groups or clinics or anything. I look back and think what on earth was positive? Well, the midwife who was monitoring my baby, she pressed the buzzer and realised baby needed to be out. The doctors, they tried their best to calm me and talk to me (while I was going wild!). After I'd had baby, it was the anaesthetists who showed the most amazing compassion. The doctors came to see me, later in the week, the consultant I'd had antenatally came to visit as she'd been there during my antenatal gestational diabetes appointments.

There were also specific members of the maternity team who I will always remember for just listening and being there. My pre-term baby was in Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU) for a few days and I could see him on an i-pad for a while. It is scary seeing these wires all hooked up to a tiny baby but these are there for a reason.

My birth experience did have an effect on me and luckily a couple of years later, I came across [Leo's charity](#). As Nathaniel was in SCBU, I could access the most valuable peer support and counselling. Those at Leo's have been through the same kind of experiences and validate your feelings and emotions.

Pre-term babies can be more fragile and vulnerable but so can full-term babies. Some babies need more support than others no matter what gestation. It can sound scary and yes, it is scary at times, but there's so many people who are willing to listen and help. There's also many families going through pre-term births who all stick together like this pre-term baby village. We all learn as we have our babies and nothing beats talking to staff who can explain the medical side of life but also those amazing families going through something similar with their babies.