

the secret club

Nothing can prepare a woman for the loss of her baby, but most of us don't realise how common miscarriage is. MONICA DAVIDSON writes about the emotions and facts associated with miscarriage.

i'm

recovering from the miscarriage of my first child. I think this is the hardest thing I've ever had to go through. My partner and I wanted a baby, this baby, more than anything in the world. For once, everything felt right — like all the parts of our lives had finally clicked into place.

I felt pregnant, it seems silly to say that, but I could feel my hormones jumping about, and the slight changes in my body. I loved watching my belly drop and my breasts swell. And my bloke was joyful. He cried when I told him I was pregnant. He would kiss my stomach before leaving for work each day.

And then the bleeding and pain began. It was slight at first...nothing to panic about, fairly common, don't worry. My doctor recommended I lie down and wait. I did, eyes closed tight, an atheist praying to any god available to hold my baby inside me. "Don't die, little one. Hold on. Hold on, please."

Six hours later, I lost clots of dark blood and my belly was racked with cramping pain — great waves of it that terrified me. It was confirmed, I had miscarried. Our first baby, no more than a tiny seahorse, was dead.

Afterwards, when we were ready to talk about it and had told our families, stories came to us. In quiet voices, women friends, other younger friends with mothers and sisters, my mother's friends, relatives — all had a miscarriage or four to talk about. Their own, their mother's, their friend's. Now, although my circle of loved ones has not changed, I know 20 women who have had at least one miscarriage. And I never knew before.

The statistics should have prepared me, but until I had actually lost my own baby, they were just empty numbers. This percentage miscary, that number bleed, and so on. To a feeless, brisan mum-to-be, like I was, these figures meant nothing. How could it touch me?

Now, I feel a little afraid every time I hear someone is pregnant. It's irrational, but so difficult to control. And I worry for myself, for when the time comes to try again. Will my next baby die too?

I now feel like nobody told me I could be touched, harmed by this. But, of course, lots of women have beautiful babies first time, and miscarriage never even occurs to them. It's like that to other women in my family. Pregnant

Margaret, 43,
had five miscarriages after the birth of her first two children, and has subsequently given up trying for another baby.

"After the first three (miscarriages), I stopped relating to the babies as foetuses. That's mostly why I didn't want to try after the last one. I'd completely lost faith in my ability to have another baby. The miscarriages had become routine. The diagnosis was, in all cases, either 'bad luck' or 'old age'. My first thought was: Why me? Why do I get shitty luck? All I wanted was a pill or something I could take that would make it go away. But, nothing. All five of them were 'one-offs'. My husband and I argued a lot; we were always wondering what our next step would be. Everyone, all our family, said that so many miscarriages was uncommon and to just keep on trying, but my confidence was destroyed. And my whole life was taken up with trying for another child. My first two had reached young adulthood and it was almost like I didn't notice, I was so wrapped up."

was pregnant. Nobody thought to keep quiet for three months, "just in case".

I told everyone I was pregnant, even the lad at the corner shop. I was too happy to hide it, or to care about being cautious. It was painful, having to reveal that it was over. Even now, people approach me to find out how my baby is. But I don't regret it. Sharing pain makes it easier to bear; I couldn't hide my sadness any more than I could hide my joy. Profound feelings like that belong to the world.

And yet, there are all those women out there who tell no one. They keep it inside themselves, only telling other women who have lost an unborn, other members of this secret club. Some of them don't even tell their man or, if they do, cover their pain because he doesn't understand. Some keep it a secret for years. I was lucky, I had support and a partner who felt the loss almost as keenly as I did. But where do these other women go? What do they do with all their sadness and anger and fear?

I am angry. Angry that I lost someone so dear and for no reason. Why me? It's

so unfair. And I'm angry that I might never again be innocently joyous at someone else's pregnancy, my reactions tempered by caution, by hindsight.

But we will try again. And I'm slowly building up hope that all will be well, and confidence in the belief that I will have children. As time goes on, I think we will become as open again as we were the first time. We probably won't tell the postman, but to our dear families and friends the news should not be scary. During the time since I miscarried, I have realised that I would rather have weeks of joy in pregnancy than months of fear. Let us enjoy being pregnant

next time, because nobody can guarantee that life will be good and fair.

For now, however, although the bleeding and the pain have stopped and my breasts and belly are normal again, it still goes on. Every day it gets a little easier, but I'm still sad. I miss my baby. I miss being pregnant, being able to wear motherhood like a sparkling badge. And I miss that bond with my man. We're closer than we've ever been, creating and losing a life in the space of months. But things are different. We were ready to be a threesome. Now, we're still only two, and longing for that extra piece we had

Sam, 27, lost her first baby at eight weeks and has just discovered she is pregnant again.

"I'm four months gone now. God, I've never been so nervous about going to the toilet. I keep expecting to see that red smear in my pants, like I did the first time. That's how I knew I was losing the baby. I was totally unprepared — I believed that every pregnancy led to the birth of a baby. I was so naive. It was shocking to me that I could miscarry, it honestly never occurred to me. Time is really dragging at the moment. I suppose a lot of women think this, but I feel like this pregnancy will last forever. I thought I'd feel better after 12 weeks, then after 16, but I can't let myself dwell on that. I have to try and accept that this pregnancy might go."

accepted so wholeheartedly into our lives. That we only had for a little time.

Spare a thought for the secret club. Women in pain, even long gone pain, are everywhere. Please don't frighten yourself if you are pregnant, or broach the subject if unasked. Just spare a thought for the women who have lost an unborn baby. There are lots of us out there.

The facts about miscarriage

The cause of an early miscarriage is often not known. In approximately 50-60 per cent of cases, miscarriage occurs because the embryo is abnormal in some way. These abnormalities would not allow it to survive birth, so miscarriage is the body's way of dealing with an imperfect baby. Usually this is just a straightforward genetic fault, the result of that particular coupling of sperm and egg not succeeding.

Occasionally, a foetus may develop improperly because of other reasons; for example, the egg was too old when fertilised, the sperm were damaged, the

mother may have had an infection or a very high temperature.

If the cause was not a problem with the foetus, then other areas must be examined. The mother may have a hormone imbalance; she may be ill, with even a minor problem like a fever or a kidney condition; there may be a specific problem with the uterus, such as uterine fibroids (more common in older women), a disorder or a congenital abnormality.

Despite soap operas and old husband's tales, babies lost due to accident or trauma are relatively rare, although this is a great worry to some mothers. Similarly, miscarriages are rarely caused by past abortions, medical treatment, or having intercourse while pregnant.

It is generally believed by most doctors that a pregnancy is at most risk in the first 12 weeks. A miscarriage after the twelfth week of pregnancy is about three times as rare as an early miscarriage.

Similarly, not all bleeding and pain experienced during pregnancy will result in miscarriage. However, it is absolutely vital to consult a doctor about any pain or bleeding, no matter how slight.

Cathy, 30, miscarried twice. The second time was found to be the result of a condition called hydatidiform mole (molar pregnancy), which occurs in one in 2000 women.

"At least with the second miscarriage, I was sent home with an explanation. I lost the pregnancy at four months. It was very painful — I had to have blood tests every week, and later two courses of chemotherapy to remove a resulting malignancy. This was all because I got pregnant...it's so bloody unfair. We can't get pregnant again for at least a year. That's been hard, but at the moment I never want to get pregnant again. I suppose I'll just run through all the emotions and come out sane in the end. I'm pretty scared, though. I honestly don't know what our final decision will be. It's been hard on my mum. She was expecting to be a grandma, now she has to sit with her previously healthy daughter going through chemotherapy. I just wanted a baby. That's all."

Where to get help

Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support (SANDS) Offers counselling for all forms of miscarriage.

NSW (02) 9506 7004
VIC (03) 9682 1590
SA (08) 277 0304
WA (08) 362 2667
QLD (07) 252 3885
ACT (06) 294 6727
TAS (002) 25 4080

Family Planning Association (FPA)

Offers grief counselling, including miscarriage. Capital cities only; regional numbers can be obtained on request or in white pages.

NSW (02) 716 8099
VIC (03) 9429 3500
SA (08) 21 5177
WA (1800) 19 8205
QLD (07) 252 4471
ACT (06) 247 3086
TAS (002) 34 7200
NT (089) 40 0326

Lifeline Offers all counselling, including grief and miscarriage. Capital cities only; regional numbers can be obtained on request or in white pages.

NSW (02) 951 5555
VIC (03) 9662 1000
SA (08) 13 1114
WA (no service available)
QLD (07) 252 1111
ACT (06) 247 0655
TAS (002) 20 0224
NT (089) 81 9227

Private grief counselling can be obtained in most capital cities and regional centres. Telephone numbers are available in the yellow pages under "Counselling — Marriage, Family and Personal" and "Organisations — Family Welfare".

Grief Support Group (Sydney only): (02) 489 6644 (24 hour counselling service run by trained volunteers).

The Nursing Mothers Association can offer grief counselling to women who have used their service before (when breastfeeding previous babies). Tel (02) 656 4141

The Bonnie Babes Foundation is a non-profit organisation, affiliated with the Department of Prenatal Medicine at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. The group offers grief counselling by qualified psychologists and women who have also lost babies. Telephone (03) 9764 2509 or write to PO Box 222, Knoxfield, Vic 3180.

Miscarriage types

There are various terms to describe different types of miscarriage in early pregnancy.

• **A threatened abortion/miscarriage** occurs when there is bleeding that is actually a suppressed period. This happens because there are insufficient hormones in the body to prevent the period. This bleeding is NOT a miscarriage, as the blood comes from your endometrium and not the placenta or the baby. Sometimes this bleeding can occur when each period would have been due, right through the early months of pregnancy. Your doctor may prescribe progesterone injections to boost hormones and stop the bleeding.

• **An inevitable abortion** occurs when the baby is no longer alive; no matter what is done, the bleeding will continue until the foetus has been expelled. It is dangerous to try and stop a foetus from aborting. There is no need to be bedridden, unless so advised by your doctor, if a foetal heart beat can be detected by ultrasound, then there is only a 10 per cent chance that you will miscarry, although bleeding may continue for some time.

• **A complete abortion** refers to when the placenta and foetus are completely expelled from the uterus. Comparatively, an **incomplete abortion** describes the state in which a miscarriage has occurred but some products of the pregnancy remain in the uterus. This can be rectified by a D&C (dilatation and curettage) under local or general anaesthetic.

• Another condition is a **missed abortion**, in which the foetus and placenta die, but remain in the uterus for a time. Usually the symptoms of pregnancy disappear, but at the time there is no other indication of foetal death.

When babies are lost after 12 weeks, there are often more concrete explanations for the cause of the miscarriage, but it may also indicate a more serious problem. Sometimes a foetus will be aborted due to a problem with the cervix, if the

neck of the womb is weak or has been damaged, it will not be able to hold the baby within. This type of miscarriage is more likely in women who have a history of losing foetuses mid-term, and can be treated by tightening the cervix with a soft, non-absorbable thread, which is then out one week before the expected due date. However, this condition can only usually be detected after a previous miscarriage.

Placental insufficiency is another condition which can lead to late miscarriage, usually after the twentieth week. This means the placenta failed to keep the baby alive, and is sometimes the result of insufficient nutrition during pregnancy.

Who it happens to

Miscarriage is more likely to occur in women over 35, women who have had trouble conceiving, first-time mums or women who have miscarried often before. First pregnancies have the greatest chance of miscarrying — up to a one-in-three chance, due to the woman having an "untwisted" uterus. There is no evidence to support that a first-time miscarriage will result in any further losses, nor is there any need for panic. Miscarriages are still far more unlikely than the birth of a healthy baby, which is the most common outcome of all pregnancies.

One miscarriage does not necessarily mean there will be others. However, a woman who has lost two or more babies in early pregnancy does stand a slightly greater risk of this happening again. She should be examined to find if there are any treatable causes. After three miscarriages there is a 50 per cent chance of another. Discussion with your doctor before becoming pregnant again is a must.

There is some dissent among doctors, nurses and midwives as to how long a couple should wait before conceiving again following a miscarriage. This information should be guided by specific advice about each miscarriage, as every woman is different. ■

Recommended Publications

- *Loss of a Baby: Understanding Maternal Grief* by Margaret Nicol, Bantam Books, 1989, \$15.
- *Hidden Loss: Miscarriage and Ectopic Pregnancy* edited by Valerie Hey et al, published by The Women's Press (UK), distributed by Alan and Unwin, \$16.95.
- *Foresight*, an association specialising in and promoting prenatal care, publishes a leaflet entitled *Guidelines For Future Parents*, available by mail only from Jan Roberts, 124 Louisa Road, Betchgrove, NSW 2041.
- SANDS has two free publications available, entitled *Miscarriage and When A Baby Dies*, available through local doctors, health centres and social work departments in most hospitals.