

WORDS: Liz Parry

# SURVIVING THE TWO-WEEK WAIT

The thrill and excitement of IVF may be one thing, but few people can prepare you for the agony of the unavoidable two-week wait, after which dreams are either fulfilled or dashed. Liz Parry looks at how to survive this fraught fortnight.

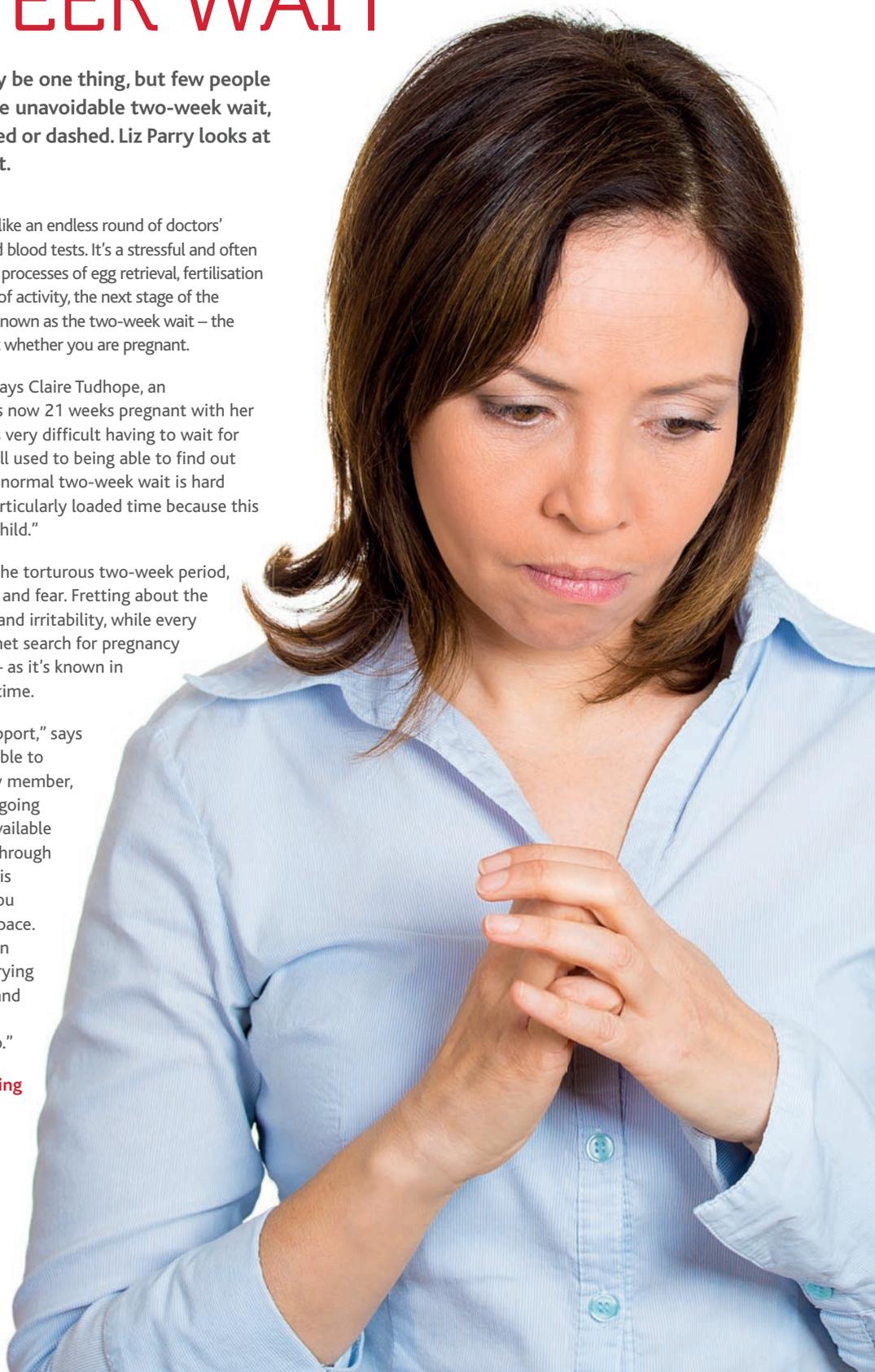
The run-up to the IVF process can often seem like an endless round of doctors' appointments, clinic visits, injections, scans and blood tests. It's a stressful and often hectic time for couples as they go through the processes of egg retrieval, fertilisation and then embryo transfer. But after this flurry of activity, the next stage of the journey becomes an agonising waiting game, known as the two-week wait – the time between embryo transfer and finding out whether you are pregnant.

"There's nothing you can do except wait," says Claire Tudhope, an acupuncturist specialising in fertility, who is now 21 weeks pregnant with her first child, following her third IVF cycle. "It's very difficult having to wait for news, especially nowadays, because we're all used to being able to find out things instantly thanks to the internet. The normal two-week wait is hard anyway, but during the IVF process it's a particularly loaded time because this might be your only opportunity to have a child."

Emotions will be running high throughout the torturous two-week period, from anticipation and excitement to doubt and fear. Fretting about the outcome can often lead to sleep problems and irritability, while every ache and pain can result in a frenzied internet search for pregnancy signs. There's no doubt about it, the TWW – as it's known in internet forums – is an incredibly stressful time.

"This is why it is really important to get support," says fertility expert Zita West. "You need to be able to share these feelings with a partner, a family member, a close friend or with someone else who is going through it. There are many useful forums available on the internet that are there to help you through this difficult time. Support for one another is extremely important in making sure that you are mentally and emotionally in the right space. Some women find transfer much easier than others, but for the majority it is a very worrying time. It's not unusual to feel a bit isolated and insecure because, after all those tests and scans, suddenly there is nothing more to do."

**Turn over to read the best advice for getting through the two-week wait:**



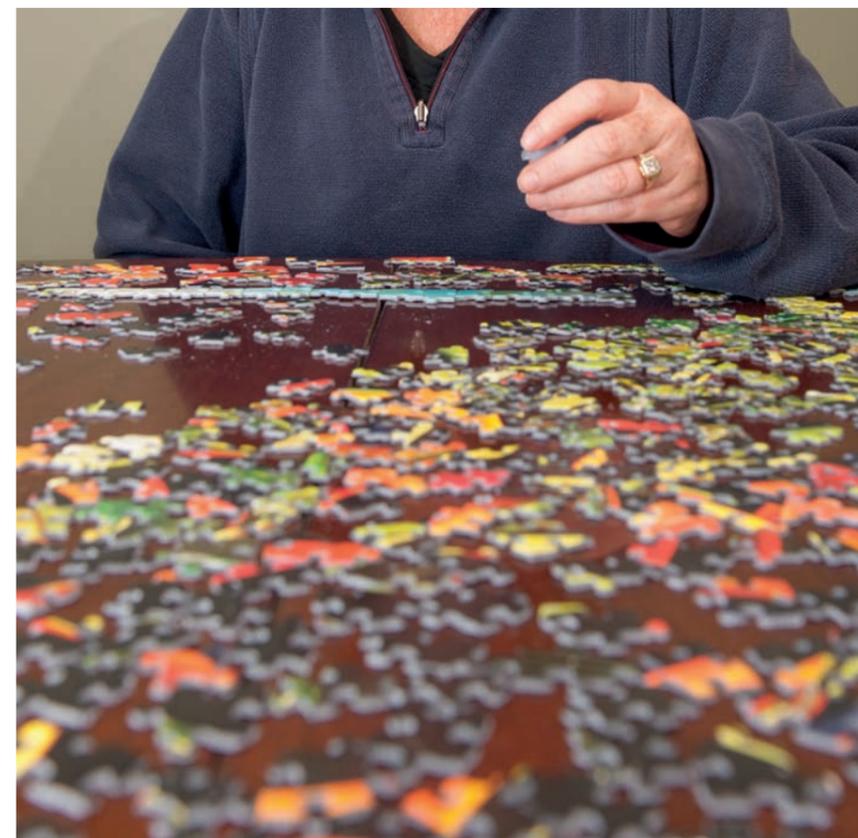
## Acknowledge the stress

"The two-week wait can be a very stressful period for women undergoing IVF treatment because you have no control over the situation," says Tracey Sainsbury, Senior Fertility Counsellor and Research Officer with The London Women's Clinic. "It's therefore important to acknowledge that feeling stressed is appropriate and to be expected. All the research shows that stress won't affect the outcome of the treatment, but we do create so much internal conflict by being hard on ourselves. We need to be kinder to ourselves."

## Keep your hands – and mind – occupied

Time just seems to drag by during the dreaded two-week wait, and it can be difficult not to obsess over the outcome. Keeping your hands and mind busy can help to distract you from the situation. "I used to do a lot of jigsaws," says Claire Tudhope. "They really help you to switch off and it can be a little bit like a meditative process." Taking up a creative pursuit like crafts, knitting, photography or cooking is also a great way to keep your mind occupied and can prove to be very relaxing."

If there's a recipe you've always wanted to try your hand at, now's the time to give it a go. Or why not pay a visit to a craft shop and pick up a kit to make your own jewellery? You might surprise yourself with what you achieve.



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## Enjoy a TV marathon

"When I was going through the two-week wait I went out and bought myself a few box sets of TV shows I'd been meaning to watch but hadn't got round to," says Bella Hardiman, who is currently pregnant with her second child following a course of fertility treatment.

"I needed some escapism to take my mind off what was happening and a *Breaking Bad* marathon really helped both me and my partner. It was lovely to curl up on the sofa together and just forget about our worries."

## Start a book club

If books are your preferred method of escapism, why not start a book club with a few friends? Decide on a book that you're all interested in and then meet up at someone's house or a café to discuss it. If you can't manage to meet up, you could set up a Facebook group to share your views.

It's worth bearing in mind that you probably want to avoid any books where pregnancy is a central theme because you want to take your mind off your current situation.



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## Look after yourself

"There are different views as to whether one should rest after a transfer or not," says Zita West. "Personally, I don't think it does you any harm to rest after a transfer, especially for the first day or two. Make sure you eat well, drink plenty of water and keep your tummy warm. Enjoy a leisurely walk or do some gentle yoga after five days. Make your mind up now to put your energy into being positive no matter what."

"I would suggest exploring relaxation techniques to ease and manage the anxiety." Even something as simple as giving yourself a manicure and pedicure, or relaxing in a warm bubble bath with some candles, can really help you to feel pampered and nurtured.

## Set yourself a Google time limit

While you are waiting for news, you will no doubt be monitoring your body each day for signs of early pregnancy or your period. It can be very tempting to Google every symptom. "There's no point saying 'don't Google' because it's virtually impossible – everyone does it," says Claire Tudhope.



## Simple stress-busters

If the stress of the two-week wait is all getting a bit much, try these tips from the London Women's Clinic to bring back a sense of calm...

### Try a breathing technique

Dr Andrew Weil's 4-7-8 breathing technique has been described as 'a natural tranquiliser for the nervous system'. The easy-to-learn technique mimics some of the de-stressing elements of meditation, and relaxes your body almost immediately. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four. Hold your breath for a count of seven. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight. This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

### Take control

Give yourself the space you need and deserve to regain control of your life. Spend some time, say an hour, thinking and being as proactive as you can in devising ways of dealing with what may be the cause of your stress. Search for the positive and focus on that. Try to see problems as challenges. Concentrate on the present. Remember, we have a choice over what may affect us. Even situations we do not like can be tolerated with a certain degree of calm.

### Get a good night's sleep

Instead of counting sheep, try to read a book or listen to music; write in your diary or make lists earlier in the evening. Avoid tea, coffee and alcohol late in the evening; have a bath by candlelight with maybe a few drops of lavender oil; avoid a stuffy atmosphere – open a window – and have a warm milky drink or a herbal tea before bed.

### Enjoy life

Try to enjoy life and not to get caught up in the whirlwind of stress. Try to be happy about the present and let the future simply unfold. Try to be positive and optimistic, calm and relaxed, saying to yourself that, whatever happens, you will still be okay. Use all your coping skills and be ready to deal with any challenges that are ahead as you journey through life.

"What I did was give myself a time limit of, say, 20 minutes and after that I would stop. Otherwise you can end up down a rabbit hole of internet forums and confusing stories that will make your head spin." Allow yourself some time to investigate, but then make sure you go off and do something else, non-pregnancy-related.

## Have a mini break

While some women prefer to keep themselves busy and occupied during the two-week wait, others will relish the opportunity to take time out through a mini break. Sometimes just getting away from your usual routine and environment can really help to give a fresh perspective on a stressful situation.

Why not book some time off work and go away with your partner to a relaxing countryside location? "I've always thought that spending time in nature is very soothing and nurturing," says Claire Tudhope. "Taking a gentle walk through the countryside can really lift your spirits and ease any stress."

## Try meditation and mindfulness

When you're going through the interminable two-week wait it's so difficult to focus on the present moment, when all you can think about is the future and whether or not you will be pregnant.

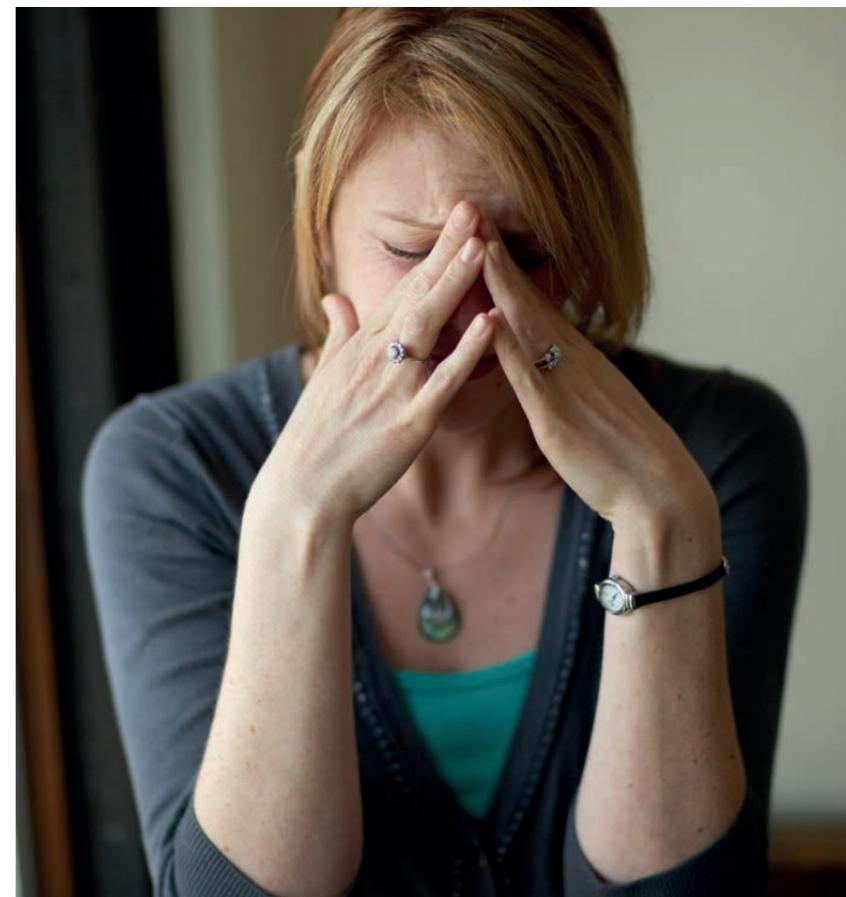
Mindfulness encourages us to shift our thoughts away from the past or the future and focus instead on the present moment. It can be tricky to master, but here's a technique that should help - sit or lie somewhere comfortable and begin scanning through each part of your body, paying attention to all the physical sensations you feel. Start with your toes and move up your legs to your stomach, chest, shoulders, neck and head, gently easing away any tension you notice. Finish by taking a few long, deep breaths. Each morning take five to 10 minutes to be quiet and meditate. Look out of the window, be aware of the stillness and enjoy the quietening of your mind.

## And what if it's not good news?

"I always say not to plan too far ahead," says Tracey Sainsbury. "If you make a plan and the outcome isn't what you had hoped then you can end up feeling like you have failed. Instead, acknowledge the fact that there isn't anything else you could or should have done and be kind to yourself. Ensure you have a good support network around you and if you are having treatment at a clinic make sure that you access the support and advice that is available to you. Take time to nurture yourself before making any decisions on what to do next."



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## "It was so fab to have an online support network"

Victoria Harrison, 42, has undergone several rounds of IVF after the first cycle resulted successfully in the birth of her son. Here she tells her experience of the two-week wait.

"We were very fortunate that our first attempt worked but then we tried several times more after that: two proper full cycles and three frozen (although only two of these resulted in a transfer). During the two-week wait period I was preoccupied by it all. I'd analyse every little sign.

In terms of coping strategies, my advice would be to just keep busy and try to follow your fertility specialist's advice on what you should and shouldn't do - for example, how much rest you need and/or whether you can go swimming. They are the experts. Equally though, it's probably best not to blame yourself for anything you did if it doesn't work.

My other coping strategy was to go online on a site called Fertility Friends, which has threads for people at exactly the same stage. You will find all the people having a transfer in, say, September and then you can stick together and swap notes and support each other. It was so fab to have this support network.

Going through IVF feels overwhelming and quite lonely at times. Lots of other couples go through it when you look at the statistics but the chance of someone else being in the same situation at the same time is tiny, so look for support online.

Finally, it can really be very hard on your relationship with each other so don't be afraid to seek professional help via a counsellor who specialises in all this - your clinic might well be able to suggest someone."

