

'My placenta gave me cancer - I thought my twins' first Christmas would be my last'

Charlie-May Flaherty couldn't believe it when doctors told her that her placenta had given her cancer, and feared she wouldn't live to see another Christmas

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Charlie-May Flaherty developed cancer after giving birth to twins George and Nancy (Image: Charlie-May Flaherty)

A mother diagnosed with cancer when her twins were just three months old feared her babies' first Christmas might be her last. Charlie-May Flaherty was diagnosed with [choriocarcinoma](#) - a rare type of cancer after her placenta turned cancerous. The cancer spread to her lungs and she juggled eight months of chemotherapy alongside sleepless nights, nappy changes and weaning – even having chemotherapy on Christmas Eve.

It was a shock to the first-time mum, who was only 28. Now, after a harrowing first Christmas with her twins, she is determined to make this Christmas special.

“There is no history of twins in my family so when I learnt I was expecting twins at my 12-week scan I was surprised but excited,” recalls Charlie-May, a virtual school officer from Hertfordshire. “It felt daunting to be having twins but I couldn’t wait.”

The pregnancy and delivery went smoothly and Charlie-May gave birth to twins, George and Nancy, in August 2021, at 33 weeks gestation.

“I asked the midwives if I’d delivered two placentas but they didn’t know, so I was shocked to then deliver an extra one the next day!” she says.

But when the twins were six weeks old, Charlie-May started bleeding. "It was much heavier than a normal period, so I took myself to A&E, where a doctor asked me: 'Are you usually this pale? Do you feel tired?' But the twins were my first children and I thought it was normal to be severely fatigued," says Charlie-May.

Doctors told her it was her first period following the birth and she went away feeling "silly". "But then two week later I started haemorrhaging and fainting," says Charlie-May. "I was sent for an emergency scan, which found that I had retained some of the placenta. When the twins were eight weeks old I had surgery to remove it."

But her issues didn't stop there and two weeks later, Charlie-May started clotting and was rushed to A&E, where she required two blood transfusions.

Devastatingly, on November 1, doctors told Charlie-May she had cancer, just 12 weeks after giving birth to her twins. Charlie-May says: "I knew it was bad news because two consultants and a lady with a clipboard asked me to come to a private room and said: "Is your partner on his way? We should wait for him."

"The consultant told me; 'I'm sorry, you've got a really rare form of cancer. We've caught it early but you will need chemotherapy. It can spread but we don't think it has yet'."

Tests of the tissue removed with her retained placenta had revealed choriocarcinoma, a rare type of cancer that happens in one in 50,000 pregnancies. According to the NHS, it can develop if the cells left behind after a pregnancy become cancerous.

Charlie-May was surprised to learn the cancer had come from placenta cells. "In essence, pregnancy had given me cancer. I had no idea cancer could be linked to pregnancy," she says.

Hearing the consultant's words was like an out-of-body experience. "I dissociated myself and was looking down on myself from above. I could see myself walking down the corridor, hear the consultant speaking...But I couldn't believe it. I was 28. I'd just given birth to twins. This wasn't what my maternity leave was supposed to look like...' she says.

Charlie-May went straight by ambulance from Hillingdon Hospital to Charing Cross Hospital and started chemotherapy that night. "I said: 'Please can I go home first and see my twins?' but there wasn't time to say goodbye."

Charlie-May was faced with a gruelling eight months of treatment. Her HCG (Human Chorionic Gonadotropin) levels were over one million- some of the highest ever seen by doctors, which resulted in weekly chemotherapy sessions.

"I kept thinking; 'I'm going to go to sleep, wake up and realise this has all been a terrible nightmare'," recalls Charlie-May. Being away from the twins was hard – especially at night - but Charlie-May did lots of video calls and recorded herself reading stories for them.

"The consultant told me there was a 90 per cent success rate with early treatment. But I couldn't help but worry whether I was in the 10 per cent," says Charlie-May.

"I even had chemotherapy on Christmas Eve – I was so relieved when I was discharged from hospital that night – just in time for the twins' first Christmas. All I wanted for Christmas was to wake up in my own bed, in my own home, for my babies' first Christmas. That Christmas was so difficult - I wanted it to be special but I was in such a dark place. I didn't know if my babies' first Christmas would be my last? Would I get to have another Christmas? Would I survive cancer? I felt really scared and there was a dark cloud hanging over us."

But whenever Charlie-May felt scared or in pain she thought of the twins. "I reminded myself: I'm doing this for George and Nancy. They were my reason for being, my everything, my whole world. I was determined to get well for them and to be a hands-on mum – I didn't want to miss out on their milestones."

"I kept thinking: If I don't make it through the treatment and this is my only opportunity to be a mother then I want to be sure that I give it everything I have and that I am the best mum I can be with the time I do have."

"The chemo made me very sick and tired, I lost all my hair and had to wear a wig, I struggled to eat, I lost my sense of taste and smell. But When I was at home, no matter how ill I felt, I still did night feeds, nappy changes and got them dressed in the morning."

Despite the cancer being found early, tests later revealed the cancer had spread to Charlie-May's lungs – classed as a secondary form of cancer. Treatment continued with weekly cycles of chemotherapy for six months, followed by more sessions of chemotherapy for another two months. Charlie-May even had chemotherapy directly in her spine to prevent it from spreading to her brain.

"The treatment was so intense and gruelling," says Charlie-May. "The hardest thing any mum who has been unwell realises is that the clock doesn't stop. The babies still needed to be fed and changed."

Just a walk round the block made Charlie-May weak. "Every time the twins slept, I slept. Just going on a short walk was difficult, let alone pushing a double buggy. For the first year I couldn't go to any mum and baby classes, I just focused on being at home with them."

Charlie-May finished treatment in time for George and Nancy's first birthday. "When we finally went to our first baby class. I looked very ill – I'd lost my eyebrows and eyelashes but I was determined not to hide away. I didn't want George and Nancy to miss out," says Charlie-May.

Charlie-May is now cancer free and will continue to be checked for 10 years. She is speaking out to raise awareness and make sure no other woman goes through what she went through. "I don't want to scare anybody as it's a very rare form of cancer. But because they thought it was my period I wasn't taken seriously. I'd hate any other woman to experience the same."

"The last few years have been the most challenging and gruelling time of my life. I do reflect on this time with astonishment and pride. I had no idea how strong I was until my diagnosis. I still am in disbelief that we have made it through."