

* 400 babies die from Strep B every year but hospitals still won't test for it

IMAGINE HOLDING YOUR NEWBORN AND HAVING TO SAY GOODBYE

Justine Baker, 39, has two children - Iris, nine and Harrison, five. Harrison almost died twice and could have been left disabled after he contracted the preventable Group B Strep virus when he was born

GROUP B STREP THE FACTS:

It's the biggest killer of newborns in the UK. Between 300-400 babies will die of it each year, although the actual figure is feared to be higher as so many cases go undetected.

Group B Strep (GBS) is bacteria carried by up to 30% of adults, most commonly in the gut, but for up to 25% of women, in the vagina too.

GBS is normally harmless, however, it can be passed to newborn babies during childbirth. Half of babies born to mothers with GBS at the time of delivery will become carriers themselves. Without preventative antibiotics in labour, 1 in 200 will develop GBS disease.

Words: Samantha Brick. Pictures: Apex.

My first pregnancy was traumatic. I had pre-eclampsia and,

at 29 weeks, I was admitted to hospital and never left - Iris arrived six weeks premature.

So, four years later, when my husband Daryl and I found out I was pregnant, we were nervous. At 27 weeks I went into hospital with pre-eclampsia again, stayed there for nine weeks and went into labour five weeks early.

I was being prepared for a Caesarean when I suddenly needed to push: 10 minutes later my son shot out on the operating table. But things were about to get even more dramatic.

When Harrison was 10 hours old, he was taken to the Special Care baby unit. The nurse said she was concerned as there was sugar in my blood while I was in labour - I'd possibly been developing gestational diabetes and it had impacted on him. They wanted to make sure he was having regular feeds to keep his blood sugar up.

I approached my newborn in the unit in horror: he was puffy, grey, totally different to the son I'd delivered hours earlier. At

4am I couldn't sleep for worrying and went back to see him. When I arrived, his incubator was gone.

SHOCKING NEWS

I'll never forget it, I was shaking. I found the nurse and she took my hand and gently broke it to me that he'd taken a turn for the worse and was in intensive care. I nearly collapsed.

They took Daryl and me to a special suite reserved for parents when there's bleak news. That convinced me he wasn't going to make it. We were told he'd brought up green bile, his gut and intestines weren't working and he was being transferred to Bristol Children's Hospital.

They weren't sure he'd survive the journey and suggested we say goodbye. Distraught doesn't begin to describe how I felt when talking to my son for what I thought was the last time.

He survived the journey, but

the surgeon who did an exploratory operation warned that if his intestine hadn't developed properly, it was likely he would die.

But within hours we had some good news: his gut was fine. Only to then be dealt a devastating blow. A midwife had taken an internal swab when my waters broke and they'd received the results. I was carrying Group B Strep and had passed it on to him. I'd never heard of it, but it's so serious in newborns the chances of him making it were 'very slim'. I wanted to scream.

The following five days were horrendous - he was fighting for his life. He had breathing difficulties, was unable to feed and had an irregular heartbeat.

Once more, we were taken to the special room: Harrison had a 10% chance of survival. It seemed it really was time to say goodbye.

For over three weeks I barely saw my daughter because my focus was on Harrison. To this day I feel terribly guilty - she was only four - but I couldn't concentrate on anything else.



Harrison with his big sister Iris...



'MY 10-HOUR OLD BABY WAS PUFFY AND GREY'

LITTLE FIGHTER

Unbelievably, Harrison kept on fighting. I know now he only survived because the head of Special Care put him on antibiotics when he was admitted to the unit. Intuition told her he wasn't 'right' - if she hadn't done this, he would have died within hours.

Gradually Harrison got better until finally, at three-and-a-half weeks old, he came home. I was the happiest mum on earth.

A week later we were getting into a normal routine, trying to put it behind us. Then, at five weeks old, he changed. It was happening again - his skin

was grey, and he was crying all the time, so he was admitted to hospital. He had a lumbar puncture so they put him on antibiotics and carried out tests. The hospital refused to test for Strep B again, telling me babies don't get it a second time. While they couldn't establish what was wrong, I was convinced I knew - but no one would listen to me, I was the 'hysterical mother'.

MOTHER'S INSTINCT

By now I'd researched Group B Strep and read that babies can - very rarely - develop it again. Out of desperation I phoned the Group B Strep charity and

spoke to the Chief Exec who made me write down the correct antibiotics.

The charity's consultant even phoned Harrison's paediatrician to advise on the correct treatment. I don't know how the consultant took this, but he accepted the advice - the most important thing was that Harrison was on the right medication.

WE'RE SO LUCKY

I spent all of my waking hours at the hospital willing Harrison to get better. Thankfully, after three weeks he took a turn for the better and was discharged.

Last year we discovered he has learning difficulties; so far, mild dyslexia has been diagnosed, which can be as a result of Group B Strep.

We're so lucky - normally if children survive Group B Strep they're very disabled. Harrison's one of the only children ever to have survived it twice. People - even health professionals - don't understand how serious it is. It's like meningitis, it can kill.

Which is why I was furious when I found out if I'd had a test at 30 weeks pregnant, we could have avoided all of this. If you test positive while pregnant, you're given antibiotics and your baby will be fine.

Five years on, it's still raw. My husband is calm about most things - but Group B Strep brings out a different side in him. It makes him angry. He had to say goodbye to our son twice, while trying to be mum and dad to our daughter and go to work. It was hell.

In my darkest hours part of me still worries Harrison's on borrowed time. But whenever I read about families whose children have been affected by Group B Strep it's usually because those sons or daughters have died - we're very lucky.