

I would break down in tears when I heard someone else was pregnant

Ciara and Noel O'Brien talk openly about their struggle to conceive. By **Denise Smith**

MAYBE you met online, found each other while travelling or locked eyes in a crowded bar. However you connected, love is on everyone's lips this week.

And while finding The One should lead to a happy ever after, not everyone gets the dream house, white wedding and, more poignantly, the chance to have children.

One in five couples in Ireland experience fertility issues and, according to statistics from the World Health Organisation, more people will look to IVF and egg donation as an effective solution to what is a common medical problem.

Ciara and Noel O'Brien are just one of the thousands of Irish couples

“Seeing a negative test every month is heart-wrenching”

who suffered through the pain and uncertainty of infertility.

Defeated and close to despair, the frustrated couple turned to Sims IVF Clinic in Cork for help.

Speaking candidly to **Magazine+**, the couple talk about their journey.

“You spend so many years trying not to get pregnant and then when you are finally ready to have a baby, it's not always simple,” explains Ciara, who lives in Cahir, Co Tipperary, with Noel and their 11-month-old twins.

“I met Noel in 2010 and after two years of dating we decided we wanted to start a family. I came off contraception and waited for something to happen for us. But for more than a year, it didn't.”

The couple married in 2014, deciding to postpone their baby plans until after the wedding.

“I had fears of not fitting into my dress, so we decided to put starting a family on hold. But as soon the wedding was over, we agreed that it was the time to put a strong focus into trying to conceive.

“I started fertility acupuncture, ovulation kits – anything you can think of, I tried it.

“It was a very challenging time. Seeing a negative pregnancy test every month is heart-wrenching.

“At times it did become too much. I would get calls from friends and family to say ‘so and so’ is having a baby.

“I remember driving the car one day and breaking down in tears when I heard about someone else that was pregnant. I was happy for them but thought, ‘will this ever be me?’”

When hope seemed to be lost, the couple were offered a lifeline.

“Whilst I was doing fertility acupuncture there was a gynaecologist consultant working in the same building.

“He suggested that I should get a lap and dye scan to get my tubes tested.

“I went for the procedure in the Mater Private Hospital in Cork and I was told my tubes were damaged. From the outset they told us that IVF would be our only option.

“It was a shock but it was an answer. It would have been harder if there were no answers.”

The pair were referred to Sims IVF Clinic, where the team guided Ciara and Noel through their journey.

“We were sent for further tests to

make sure that Noel's sperm count was normal and that my blood work was OK,” explains Ciara.

“Once everything came back clear we began the egg retrieval. It was uncomfortable but it is amazing what you will go through when there is a possibility of holding your baby at the end of the process.

“We had about nine eggs and, naturally, some deteriorated. We were left with four good embryos and decided to implant two and freeze the other two.”

“The consultants at Sims said to us, ‘as soon as the embryos are transferred you need to believe that you are pregnant.’

“That is the exact mindset we had. On the day they were transferred I considered myself pregnant.

“The blood test to confirm the pregnancy came two weeks later.”

Despite the couple's joy, the pregnancy was tempered by anxiety.

“We knew we were

pregnant, but at that point we didn't know if we were having one baby or two. It was only at six or seven weeks that we saw two heartbeats.”

On March 15, 2016, Lily and Leon made their way into the world.

“They have changed our lives,” says the proud mum. “Leon is a typical boy and he is placid. Lily is a very outgoing, she rules the roost.”

Aside from the emotional highs and lows, with IVF also comes a financial burden. IVF can cost upwards of €4,600 for one cycle.

“When you want a child you don't think of that at the start, you know you are going to have to spend some money, we would have gone four or five times regardless. There is no price on the joy Leon and Lily have brought to our lives.”

Ciara, who turns 40 this year, encourages couples who are struggling to conceive to seek help.

“Knowledge is power, remember that. Once you know what the problem is you can move forward.” +

● For further information, see www.sims.ie. Alternatively, call (0)1 2080710 for the Dublin clinic, or (0)21 441 0900 for Cork.

IVF SUCCESS RATES ARE GROWING

Infertility in Ireland is largely due to pregnancy being delayed until relatively late in life, when egg quality is declining, according to Dr Hans Arce.

“We currently have one of the highest infertility rates in Europe, but there are varied reasons for this and excellent exploratory tests now available, so we can generally pinpoint causes and treatment options quickly and easily,” Dr Arce explains.

More than 8,000 babies have been born in Ireland

as a result of fertility treatment with Sims IVF Clinic since its foundation nearly 20 years ago.

With fertility technology rapidly advancing, couples having difficulty conceiving now have myriad support and treatment options, the Sims IVF director says.

Recently compiled figures on 2015 egg collections in the Cork fertility clinic showed that over

50% of women in their late 30s who underwent treatment successfully achieved a clinical pregnancy.



BABY JOY: Dr Arce with Lily and Leon

BLESSED: Ciara and Noel have IVF to thank for their twins