

## TRUE HEALTH DRAMA

# Ill unless I'm pregnant

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Something wasn't right. It was only 8am, but as I climbed out of bed and wandered into the bathroom, I couldn't help feeling uneasy.

*My legs didn't feel like jelly and I'd walked in a straight line without bumping into anything.*

Weirder still, when I went to pick up my toothbrush, I managed to grab it first time.

'Something odd's going on,' I said to my husband, Rob, 26, as I came out of the bathroom five minutes later. 'It's like I've got better overnight.'

'Perhaps it's something to do with the baby?' he suggested.

But I was only a few weeks gone, so surely my unborn baby couldn't be the reason I was so well. Could it?

I'd always been a clumsy child, spilling drinks and tripping over myself. No one thought anything of it until I was 14 and my mum, Jackie Beeson, 42, noticed my spine was curved.

A couple of months later, I'd had a six-hour operation to break 22 bones in my back and have two metal rods inserted to straighten it.

I'd grown a whole four inches. Which is a lot when you're only 4ft 11in tall!

Back at home, I'd loved my new 5ft 3in height, but when Mum realised it hadn't stopped me

tripping over all the time, we'd been referred to a neurologist at St Richards Hospital, Chichester. There, doctors diagnosed me as having Friedrich's ataxia.

'It's an inherited disease that damages the nervous system,' the doctor explained.

'It causes a lack of balance and coordination, eyesight and hearing problems, and slurred speech. As yet, there's no cure.'

'Inherited?' Mum had blurted in disbelief. 'But my other two children are fine.'

'If both parents carry the gene, there's a chance one of their children will be affected,' he'd said.

So I'd had no choice but to go home and carry on as normal.

I didn't take tablets or anything, and the doctor couldn't predict when the symptoms would start.

It wasn't until four years later, when I was 19, that they'd first kicked in.

I'd been at The Oystercatcher pub in Climping, Littlehampton, with my mates and when



Me and my little girls, Emily, 6, and Holly, 3

Now I'm pregnant again with twins

I'd tried to walk to the bar, my legs had turned to jelly and I'd careered towards the loos instead.

'I thought you said that was your first,' a friend had joked.

But it was no laughing matter when, a few months later, I'd collapsed

outside a club and a bouncer thought I was drunk.

Wobbling home that night, the realisation hit me. I was ill, and it was only going to get worse.

It was only as I started searching on the internet that I realised how much worse it could get. Sufferers

**'People thought I was drunk'**

could be in a wheelchair with an active mind and a crippled body.

'What if I'm wheelchair-bound by the time I'm 20?' I'd sobbed to Mum.

'It's progressive,' she'd said. 'It might not happen for another 20 years.'

She was right. I had to make the best of things.

A few months later, in December 2001, I'd met Rob while working in the Alldays supermarket and agreed to a date.

Thankfully, I hadn't fallen over on our first date and when I'd told him about my condition, he'd been brilliant.

'We'll get through it together,' he'd promised. In September the

following year we'd got married, and four months later we were over the moon to find out I was pregnant.

But now, just a couple of days on, I'd woken up and it was like the ataxia symptoms had gone.

As my bump grew and I went for my first scan, I realised I hadn't fallen over once since I'd got pregnant. My speech hadn't been slurry when I was tired either, and my coordination was better than it had been in years.

For nine blissful months, I felt brilliant.

The curvature of my spine meant I was booked in for a C-section. But no sooner had I had the op on 15 September 2003, than the ataxia symptoms returned with a vengeance.

At home with our little girl, Emily, I adapted to using a walking frame in the house and a wheelchair outside. By the time Emily was 1,

## FRIEDREICH'S ATAXIA

**What is it?** Ataxia, meaning 'absence of order', is a neurological disorder. Sufferers have trouble with coordination, owing to problems with the nervous system. There are different

forms of ataxia, but most are progressive. However, during pregnancy, there have been cases where the surge of hormones has eased the symptoms.

**What are the symptoms?** They include poor coordination, stumbling, difficulty swallowing, writing or buttoning up clothes, slurred speech and abnormal eye movements.

**How is it treated?** There is no cure, but occupational and speech therapy, as well as physio, can help relieve the symptoms.

she'd learned to crawl to me if she needed anything, and we coped just fine.

So Rob and I were overjoyed when in April 2007, I became pregnant with our second daughter, Holly, now 3.

As before, for nine months the symptoms faded, but cruelly came back after she was born.

Two years on, I'm pregnant with twins. Thankfully, neither of my girls have shown any symptoms of ataxia, so I'm hoping that when the twins arrive at the end of this month, they'll be fine too.

Meanwhile I take vitamins to keep my bones and joints healthy, and hope that one day there'll be a cure.

**Dr Paola Giunti, London Ataxia Centre at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, says:** 'The effect of pregnancy on ataxia hasn't been studied before, so there isn't currently any medical evidence for what Liz describes. However, as an ataxia expert I have heard of this happening to other patients.' Visit [www.ataxia.org.uk](http://www.ataxia.org.uk)