

# yourhealth

**INSIDE:** Night blindness ● Managing your illness with a mobile phone

Almost 35,000 women undergo IVF treatment in Britain every year. But the cost and high doses of drugs are leading experts to look for a more natural approach which, some are claiming, produces the healthiest eggs. SALLY BROWN reports

**O**PTING for in vitro fertilisation is never a decision that's taken lightly. However much you long for a baby, being injected with up to three different hormones, all with potential side effects, is a big step. What worries some medics is the volume of drugs to which women are exposed. They believe the answer lies with a gentler alternative that works more closely with your natural cycle and uses lower doses of hormones.

"So-called 'mild IVF' is more patient friendly, it doesn't take as long and there are far fewer side effects," says Professor Bill Ledger of the University of Sheffield. "It's the future."

Unlike conventional IVF, which is designed to produce as many eggs as possible, the aim of mild IVF is to produce just a few, very good quality eggs, which means minimal doses of hormones are used for a shorter time.

According to the British Fertility Society, three mild cycles are as effective as two conventional cycles and result in fewer complications, which can include kidney failure and in extreme cases, even death. Other side effects include hot flushes, night sweats, bloating, abdominal pain and nausea.

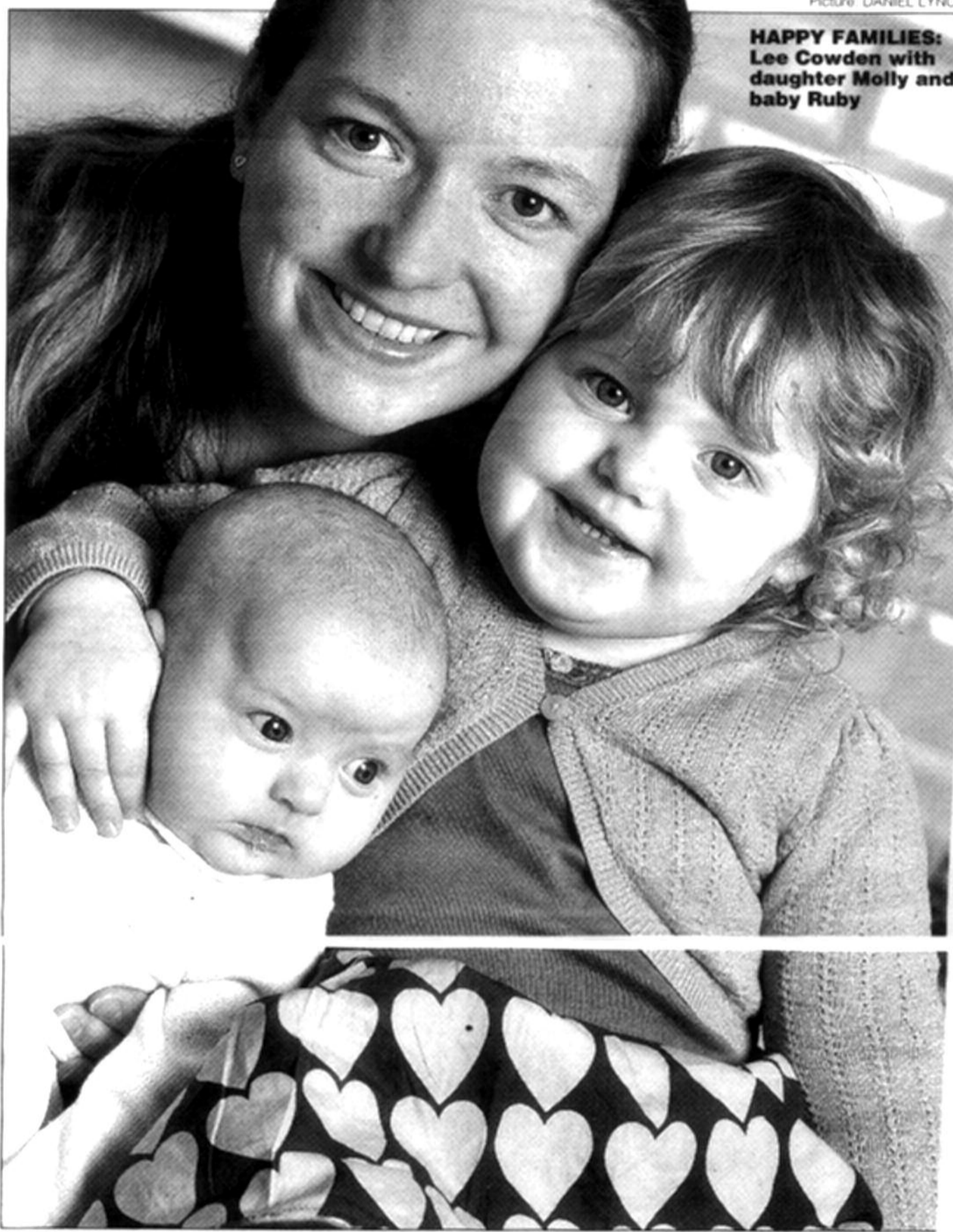
With traditional IVF, about one to two per cent of women have an extreme reaction to ovary-stimulating drugs, called ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. The ovaries swell up and release chemicals into the bloodstream, which then make vessels leak more fluid and can result in deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolus. Women who have polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) are particularly vulnerable.

Another alternative to traditional IVF is in vitro maturation (IVM), which uses almost no drugs but produces lower pregnancy rates. IVM is particularly suitable for women with PCOS because the condition affects the production of mature eggs, necessary for conception.

Women with PCOS do produce eggs but none grow large enough for ovulation.

IVM requires only immature eggs - they're collected early in a woman's cycle and then grown in a laboratory before fertilisation. This is also useful for women who do not respond to IVF drug treatment. However, only a handful of fertility centres in the UK offer IVM.

Seek advice about IVF at most clinics and mild IVF won't even come up. "It is still under evaluation," says Dr Mark Hamilton, chairman of the British Fertility Society. "It is a balance of using less drugs but still



Picture DANIEL LYNCH  
**HAPPY FAMILIES:** Lee Cowden with daughter Molly and baby Ruby

## I thought I'd never conceive

LEE COWDEN, 30, a music therapist from Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, has two children; Molly, who is two, and three-month-old Ruby

I WAS 15 when I was first diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome. I never had a period and was told it was unlikely I'd become pregnant without fertility treatment.

After I got married in 2004 my doctor suggested the fertility drug Clomid. As I have a family history of oestrogen-related blood clots, he put me on a low dose. He also referred me to a fertility clinic at my local hospital, where I saw a consultant who immediately doubled the dose. As I knew he was aware of my medical history, I didn't worry.

Two weeks later I suddenly felt as though I couldn't breathe. Pain radiated down my left side and my arm went numb. My husband called an ambulance and after having an ECG I was rushed into intensive care and immediately given clot-busting drugs and morphine.

The next day a cardiologist confirmed that I'd had a heart attack. They thought the fertility drugs had caused a blood clot that had lodged in an artery

... hospital, I spent three weeks in hospital and when I went home I felt very low because I thought that without fertility treatment I had no chance of having a baby.

However, my husband did some research and we found out about low-dose IVF. I saw Geeta Nargund and got pregnant during the first cycle.

I had Molly in 2006 and Ruby, who was conceived naturally, in 2008.

Knowing what I know now, I'd never have agreed to go on a high dose of Clomid and what scares me is that it could easily have ended far more tragically.

# IS THIS THE FUTURE OF IVF?

obtaining enough eggs and embryos to maximise success."

Last year a group of experts formed the International Society For Mild Approaches In Assisted Reproduction ([www.ismaar.org](http://www.ismaar.org)) to promote and offer milder forms of IVF, as many believe that embryos created as naturally as possible are healthier.

"Nearly half of all eggs collected in standard IVF cycles are chromosomally abnormal and so are less likely to result in a healthy, full-term baby," says consultant

gynaecologist Geeta Nargund, medical director of Create Health Clinic London ([www.stgeorghouseclinic.org.uk](http://www.stgeorghouseclinic.org.uk)).

"We also have concerns regarding the long and short term risk of repeatedly stimulating the ovaries to produce more eggs. There may be consequences for a woman's reproductive organs, in particular uterine cancer."

Mild IVF takes two weeks as opposed to four or five with conventional IVF and it involves fewer clinic visits. It's cheaper,

costing about £2,000 per cycle compared with £4,000.

A 2007 study in The Lancet followed 404 women under 38. Half underwent standard IVF treatment and the other half had the mild version. After a year, 43.4 per cent of those undergoing mild IVF were pregnant, compared with 44.7 per cent of those on standard treatment. It took those having mild IVF, on average, just one more treatment to conceive.

However for some consultants the lower success rate rules it out.

"If more couples were made aware of milder forms of IVF, more would be happy to try it before moving on to bigger doses of drugs," says Geeta. "It's time to make IVF safer, simpler and affordable. Mild IVF is going to be the future of fertility treatment."

● For more information about mild IVF, see [www.naturalcycle.org](http://www.naturalcycle.org)

● A version of this story appears in the February issue of Zest magazine, which is out now.

