

Irrigation During Pregnancy

Alison writes. . . When I found out I was pregnant in April of last year, like any other expectant mother, all sorts of thoughts went through my mind. But extra thoughts were whizzing round mine, such as how will it affect my stoma? Will I still be able to irrigate?

When I trawled the Internet for information to draw on the experiences of others, I realised that there was nothing of value out there and I must travel this journey alone! I decided to write to Tidings to give a small insight into how I managed through my pregnancy in the hope that others may benefit from it.

A very brief history about me, I am 37 years old. I developed symptoms of rectal Crohn's disease when I was about 24 years old. I underwent an emergency ileostomy initially but things didn't calm down and improve and eventually I was converted to a colostomy in 2001. I was a guinea pig for new medications, but even then my body got used to them and failed to respond. In 2002 it was quite evident that the only way I was to stand a chance of survival was to have my rectum removed and a permanent colostomy formed. It later transpired that I had a very rare form of Crohn's disease, with only 2% suffering from the type I had.

After a major operation in 2002, I never looked back. I was home in five days, and determined that I would no longer let this control me. I have maintained my health and no longer suffer with the disease as the whole 5cm of it was removed and thankfully has never manifested itself again since.

Shortly after my operation I was shown how to irrigate. I wasn't sure it was for me, and my recollection is sitting in the hospital stoma care treatment room with my irrigation sleeve dangling in a bucket on the floor while I was shown what to do.

As I left I was adamant it was not what I wanted. However, not being one to be defeated, I took it up, gave it a go, and have done so ever since. I feel it gives me confidence and peace of mind that nothing will come out of my stoma for long periods of time and it makes me feel cleaner.

For the first few months of my pregnancy irrigation continued as normal. It was quite nice as when you are pregnant your digestion and bowel movements slow down in order for your baby to get all the goodness from your food, so I found that it was sometimes a good three to four days before I felt I needed to irrigate again.

When I hit five months things started to change. When I went to irrigate I couldn't get the water to go in. I tried to irrigate whilst I was sitting on the loo but the water just kept flowing straight back out. This caused much frustration and often tears. I was tired, getting bigger, and I didn't need this hassle! I kept going back to the bathroom and having another go, but kept coming back downstairs defeated. My husband told me not to worry but it did get me down. Nobody likes a change in such an important routine.

The next time I tried I decided to feel where my stoma went so I gently inserted my finger and finally realised that the baby had now grown enough to push my colon upwards, which explained *why* the water wouldn't flow in. So how was I supposed to get the water to flow uphill?

The solution I came up with was to lie flat in the bath, hang the water bag on the shower rail and let it flow in that way. Not being able to let the return go down the toilet and certainly not down the bath plughole, I used four wooden pegs, to roll up and peg together the bottom of the irrigation sleeve. Once I had finished I would grab the bottom of the sleeve to take the weight whilst I fumbled my weight out the bath, took the pegs off and emptied it down the toilet as normal.

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I have to confess that I did have a couple of 'trial accidents' which saw the weight being too much for the pegs to handle on two occasions. I had to laugh on both as I thought that if I ever told anyone what had happened they would never believe it! It was one of those times where you just have to stand and look at the situation almost in shock and take it all in for a minute or two then try to work out how on earth you're going to clean it up!

Note from Adrian: Rolling the bottom of the sleeve round a pencil, and putting the clothes pegs over that, would have been much more secure.

I overcame that problem by placing the pegged bottom of the sleeve into a carrier bag! That way, when I was ready to stand up I grabbed the handles to take the weight, lifted it at the same time as I stood up, and had no more accidents!

Apart from this minor change to my irrigation, the pregnancy itself was surprisingly trouble free. Considering the major surgery on numerous occasions that my body has been through over the last ten or more years, I never thought for one minute I would even be lucky enough ever to be a mum. I was convinced something would go wrong as that is my life, or certainly had been.

There are times when I wish that things could be different, but I have learned to accept the things I cannot change and concentrate on changing the things I can. I laugh at the situations I have found myself in since having my stoma, as well as sometimes crying.

Not everyone is lucky with their stoma and many still suffer despite having one. I am very lucky. I am not only thankful to my stoma for my life, but find myself thanking it again for the miracle of my baby son. Without it I would not be here enjoying every sleepless moment!

27th July 2011