

Local mother-to-be overcame rare condition

By Marquita Griffin newsroom@fbherald.com | Posted: Tuesday, June 10, 2014 8:41 am

Randee Immel is pushing for awareness.

Like many before her, it was experience that opened her eyes to a rare disorder that affects one in 1,000 pregnancies in the U.S. — intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy.

ICP is a liver condition unique to pregnancies. It causes toxic bile acids to accumulate in the blood, causing fetal distress and arrhythmia, meconium staining, preterm labor and respiratory distress.

In 15 percent of cases, it causes stillbirth.

“It was not (just) my life that it threatened, but the life of my unborn child,” said Immel, who was diagnosed with the disorder when she was 30 weeks pregnant. “Who would ever think that a little itch could have such consequences?”

On Wednesday, mothers and fathers nationwide are hosting ICP Awareness Day events in efforts to educate the public about this disorder. Immel, however, beat them to the punch — with her own awareness event in Richmond on Sunday.

“Things went great,” she said. “This was our first year having an event in Houston, so my goal for next year is to increase our numbers at the event. We had a fun day of meeting several other mothers that developed ICP. Two of us even had our own mothers there that experienced ICP in the ’80s. It was great to sit and talk about our own personal experiences.”

Insane itching

For those who haven’t experienced ICP, it’s just about indescribable, Immel said.

The bottom of her feet, the palms of her hands and her legs itched to the brink of insanity.

It “felt like I had ants crawling all over me,” she said.

“I began to feel that I might be going crazy,” she said. “I would sit and soak my feet in ice cold water, rub Sarna lotion all over and pray.”

The itch, unfortunately, never went away.



The Immels

After a grueling pregnancy and surviving Intrahepatic Cholestasis of Pregnancy, Randee and Stephen Immel are the proud parents of a vivacious baby boy names Caleb. After surviving her experience with ICP, Randee is on mission to spread awareness about ICP.

ICP occurs most often in the last three months of pregnancy — when hormone concentrations are at their highest level — but it can begin at any time.

Intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy is typically characterized by itching, without a rash, that is localized to the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, but can be anywhere on the body. The itch is also traditionally resistant to antihistamines or anti-itch remedies.

“The doctors said I could take Benadryl, but that did nothing to help with the itching. In fact, it kept me awake,” Immel said.

She was also prescribed ursodiol, also know as urso, which helps with the bile acid production in the body. Still, it wasn’t a cure-all.

“Your body eventually becomes immune to the dose you are on,” Immel explained. “So the key with urso is to increase it periodically.”

She recalls one night lying in bed wondering if she’d make it to the end of the pregnancy.

She only had three weeks to go, but that might as well have been a lifetime.

“Not only was I struggling physically with the itch, but mentally as well,” Immel said. “I worried constantly for the life of my sweet baby boy.”

The hope that she would cross the finish line safely came from close sources — her mother, who experienced the same thing when she was pregnant with Immel, her father and her husband Stephen.

“It was an encouragement to know that my mother and I miraculously survived the same symptoms in 1984 without any knowledge of ICP,” Immel said. “And my husband was my rock.”

At 27 weeks, Immel was put on bed rest and as a result of ICP she developed preeclampsia and gestational diabetes.

“With ICP, early induction is key,” Immel said.

Her son Caleb, who is almost 9 months, was delivered at 37 weeks. Although he’s “healthy, happy boy,” he spent nine days in NICU because his lungs weren’t fully developed.

“Those were the hardest nine days of my life,” Immel said. “I was able to hold him for just a couple of minutes after birth before he was rushed off.”

“However, he is now in the 100th percentile for height and weight-takes after his dad,” she added with a laugh.

“I am so lucky that my baby survived my toxic body, but not everyone is so fortunate,” Immel said.

Spreading the word

Immel has started a Houston-area group for moms who have experienced or are experiencing ICP.

For mothers in the area who want to join, search “Houston, TX ICP Care Moms” on Facebook.

Immel also encourages the public, as well as mothers suffering from ICP, to join ICP Care’s support group on Facebook at www.facebook.com/icpcare.