

Pain and infertility defeated

After nearly two years of trying to get pregnant, a diagnosis of endometriosis brought hope to Jennifer and Joseph Ariola of Fort Myers. After meeting with Dr. Craig R. Sweet, a reproductive endocrinologist



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and medical director of Specialists in Reproductive Medicine and Surgery, the couple learned that Ms. Ariola was among the 30 to 40 percent of infertile women who have endometriosis.

“After struggling so long and not knowing the cause of our infertility, we were so hopeful to finally have an explanation and treatment options,” says Ms. Ariola. “It’s often a silent disease and many women, including myself, are unaware that they have it until they try for years unsuccessfully to have a baby. That’s why awareness is so important.”

National Endometriosis Awareness Month is an annual event to increase understanding about the disease, its symptoms, treatments and ongoing research. One of the leading causes of female infertility, endometriosis is a chronic gynecological disease in which the cells from the lining of the uterus grow outside the uterus and spread to other areas such as the pelvis and ovaries. The resulting damage can block the reproductive organs, in some cases preventing conception. In addition, chemical secretions from the endometriosis itself may interfere with fertility by harming eggs, sperm and embryos.

The most common symptoms of

endometriosis are pelvic pain, painful intercourse and painful periods. For many women, the pain of endometriosis is so severe and debilitating that it impacts their lives in significant ways. Yet, once diagnosed, the condition is potentially treatable.

“The good news is that 80 to 90 percent of the patients have an improvement of their symptoms for up to a year following surgery. Depending on the stage of the disease, the chances of becoming pregnant also increase for most patients following treatment of the disease,” says Dr. Sweet.

After the doctor surgically removed the pelvic endometriosis and a polyp found within Ms. Ariola’s uterus, the couple tried to conceive naturally. Another six months passed without success and they found themselves back in the doctor’s office to discuss further treatment.

“Following diagnosis and treatment, about one-third of the women with endometriosis achieve pregnancy naturally,” says Dr. Sweet. “In some cases, however, ovulation induction combined with intra-uterine insemination or in vitro fertilization may be the next best steps with superb success rates.”

“Dr. Sweet shared with us the statistics, we discussed our chances and he offered us solutions,” says Ms. Ariola. “We opted for in vitro fertilization, a process during which my eggs were removed and harvested with my husband’s sperm. We then implanted our two embryos and fortunately, it worked on our first try. Last month, I gave birth to twins — a boy and a girl. As I hold my babies in my arms, I can honestly say it was all worth it.” ■