

“Should I risk my life to have a baby?”

Glamour staffer and leukemia patient Erin Zammett Ruddy desperately wants a child, but first she has to make the scariest decision she's ever faced.

Erin's favorite activity: playing with her three-year-old nephew, Andrew

In November 2001, Erin Zammett Ruddy, now 28, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for most patients. For the past four years, she's chronicled her experiences in these pages, including, in April 2003, the shocking news of her older sister Melissa's diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma. Now both are in remission, and Erin's got babies on the brain—but serious struggles lie ahead.

I can't believe Nick and I have been married for a year now. We're still total newlyweds: We spend weekends exploring our neighborhood, buying overpriced pillows and plants; we meet up after work for dinners in cozy restaurants; we lie on the couch and watch reruns of *Family Guy*. But despite all the love and happiness, there's a dark cloud hanging over our heads: I'm aching to be a mother. And having cancer means I'm not sure how—or if—I can.

I'm only 28, but I need to decide soon whether I want to try to conceive due to the health risks involved. To get pregnant, I'd have to go off Gleevec—the drug that got me into remission—because of the danger of miscarriage and birth defects. That means I might relapse, and if I do it's better to be young, when my body is healthy enough to fight back. I could also stop Gleevec for a short time to

harvest my eggs, then start back on the drug and have a surrogate mother carry the baby for me. Nick and I are going to see Dr. Mauro, my oncologist, in a few weeks to weigh the risks and consider our options. I'm excited, but also scared that he might caution us against trying.

I think about kids all the time. I went shopping with friends recently and spent 45 minutes in the baby section of a boutique, fondling silk booties and reading silly board books. And I'm getting really emotional: The other night at a big family dinner, my nephew, Andrew, who's three, had to go potty and announced, “I only want Aunt Erin to take me.” I choked up. Andrew makes my heart ache.

Although Nick and I couldn't be closer, I'm feeling alone with my baby desires. We've talked a little about the challenges involved in getting pregnant, but I don't want to overload him—or freak him out about the risks—until we have our official conversation with Dr. Mauro. Protecting Nick from the worries spinning through my head feels like the right thing to do. I can't really talk to my friends about this either; they're great, but they can only relate so much.

The main thing that's been helping me is hearing other women's stories. Since writing about my baby lust in this column over the past few years, I've gotten e-mails and letters from fellow CML patients about their own motherhood dilemmas. They all told me to call if I ever wanted to talk,

and I finally took a few up on their offer. What they said was incredibly eye-opening, even if some of it was hard to hear.

A dangerous accidental pregnancy

I always assumed Nick and I would be one of those couples who “happen to” get pregnant—you know, ditch birth control, have fun trying. But that’s never going to be the case. If I go off Gleevec to conceive, we’ll have to plan things to the T so I’m ovulating and have the highest chance of getting pregnant fast. If I don’t, I risk relapse every day. It’s not romantic, but I stopped feeling sorry for myself after I heard Jennifer Catlett’s story.

Jennifer, 38, of Louisville, Kentucky, found out she had CML in June 2004; within a year of starting Gleevec she was in remission—and, unknown to her, pregnant; she was six weeks along when she realized. Jennifer did quit Gleevec, but it was a tense time. “At the ultrasounds the technician would say, ‘Here’s his heart and here’s his brain,’ and I’d think phew! He has a brain,” Jennifer told me.

Although there’s hardly any data about birth defects resulting from mothers who get pregnant while on Gleevec, they are a possibility. Fortunately, Aden Ruel Tyler was born healthy, seven pounds, eight ounces. “I can’t even begin to describe how ecstatic I was in the labor room when I heard he was fine,” Jennifer said.

Sounds like a happy ending, except that she relapsed during her pregnancy, my worst nightmare. But, she said, “At the time, I was so worried about the baby’s health, I

“People have told me I should be happy just to be alive. I am, but I still want to have a baby.”

wasn’t even that upset.” She was lucky: She restarted Gleevec after giving birth and is now back in remission.

Jennifer’s story was a big reality check. As much as I hate thinking that Nick and I would have to coordinate our sex life, when it comes down to it, I’d rather be unsexy than unsafe. Who knows what kind of problems a child of Gleevec could end up with? I hope little Aden will be OK. Then again, my mother wasn’t on any crazy drugs when she was pregnant, and two of her three kids got cancer. I guess life is inexplicable that way.

Will we have to use a surrogate?

In recent years people I’ve met who’ve beaten cancer have told me I should be happy just to be alive. I am, but I still want to do everything I wanted to do before cancer, which includes having a baby. Jennifer Eisenbud Sawle, another CML patient, felt the same way. Thirty-three and living in San Francisco, Jen already had a 10-month-old girl at the time of her diagnosis in 2004. When I checked back in with her, she shocked me when she said, “Bruce and I have started the surrogate process. We want so badly to have another child.”

But wait, I thought, why didn’t she want to have a baby on her own? “I’m worried Gleevec would harm the fetus, but I don’t want to put myself at risk by going off the drug,” she said. “I don’t want to miss seeing my children grow up.”

Her words really unnerved me. Would it be selfish to bring a child into the world if I may not be around for him or her? I forget that CML can be a deadly disease, and Gleevec

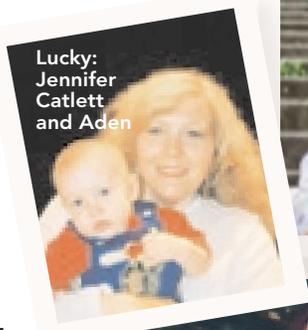
is not a cure. But what lingers in my mind is something the first Jennifer said: "Don't make decisions as a cancer patient. Make them as a person, because you could get hit by a bus tomorrow and the cancer thing won't have mattered at all." Not exactly Shakespeare, but it's what I needed to hear.

She never gave up hope

"My husband, Steve, and I struggled a lot with wanting children and not knowing what was possible." That's what Georgia Coats wrote to me two years ago. Diagnosed with CML at age 27, she joined one of the original clinical trials for Gleevec. She responded well, but when she brought up pregnancy her doctor said no; it was too risky. "People would say, 'Why don't you adopt?'" and I'd answer, "Why don't *you* adopt?!" she recalled when we spoke. "I couldn't stand having everyone tell me what to do." I knew exactly what she meant. I feel like I should be all Angelina Jolie about adopting, but the truth is, I want the chance to experience giving birth to a child Nick and I created.

By April 2003 Georgia, who lives in Dearborn, Michigan, was in remission and had a new doctor who was willing to

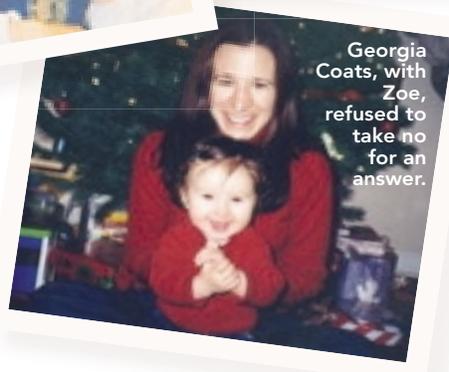
The women who inspire me



Lucky: Jennifer Catlett and Aden



Jennifer Eisenbud Sawle, with Raya, is using a surrogate.



Georgia Coats, with Zoe, refused to take no for an answer.

help her to have a baby. "There were tears, prayers, even a few breakdowns," she said. "My husband was very supportive but he deals with big things by ignoring them, so I felt like he was ignoring *me*. I'd scream, 'I can't take this!' I definitely felt a bit crazy."

In May 2004 she gave birth to Zoe (which means "life" in Greek). Like Jennifer, Georgia relapsed during her pregnancy, but she's fine and would love another baby. "Now that I'm a mom, the risks are more terrifying," she said. "But after Zoe, I know I'd

rather live a small time as a mother than a long time as a cancer patient." Hopefully she won't have to face that dilemma. Hopefully *none* of us will.

I couldn't have picked more inspiring women to talk to. Yes, I'm overwhelmed by everything there is to think about—especially the fact that two out of three of these women relapsed during pregnancy. It seems kind of crazy to voluntarily risk my life like that; I'm not sure what I'll do. The other night, after Nick and I spent the day babysitting Andrew, Nick told me that he's scared to be a father

because of the responsibility. I told him I'm scared to be a mother, too. But I'm more afraid of *not* being one. ©

For past installments of Erin's diary, go to glamour.com.