

# BABY AVA'S CANCER TRIUMPH

Despite a shocking diagnosis when she was born, Holly and Oliver's girl has proven to be a little battler

**C**radling her newborn baby in her arms, first-time mum Holly Coppins had no idea of the nightmare that lay ahead. With her husband Oliver by her side, the couple were devastated when just hours after the birth, their daughter Ava was diagnosed with a rare form of leukaemia.

"We were beside ourselves... straight away your fairytale is over," says Holly, choking back tears.

"If you have a normal pregnancy, a normal birth, you'd think you'd have a healthy baby."

It was a world away from the "dream pregnancy" Holly had experienced. The couple were thrilled to discover they were expecting just weeks before tying the knot, sharing the happy news with family and friends on the big day.

"We planned to have kids but she was a little surprise," says Holly, 28, who spends her days delivering babies as a midwife at the Royal Hobart Hospital. "We were excited - we felt as ready as we could be."

After a 17-hour labour they welcomed baby girl Ava Coppins, weighing 3.24kg, on August 30, 2019.

"I'll never forget holding her in my arms for the first time - it was instant love," says Holly. "I was speechless. There are no words for the feeling."

But nothing could have prepared the new parents for the fight ahead after doctors discovered a concerning rash on Ava's body.

At just 12 hours old, Ava was airlifted to Melbourne for further testing after initial blood samples showed abnormal cells and

a high white platelet count, raising the alarm for infection or something more sinister, cancer.

"She was such a well, healthy baby despite her rash, so it didn't make sense how things could look so bad," says Holly. "I was in shock."

## WORST FEARS

Holly and baby Ava were flown by the Royal Flying Doctor Service to Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, while Oliver, 36, joined them later that evening.

Ava was placed in intensive care for four weeks while she underwent bone marrow testing, which confirmed the couple's worst fears - Ava had an incredibly rare form of cancer, acute megakaryoblastic leukaemia.

"I felt like a ton of bricks had hit me," Oliver recalls. "We were hopeful the testing would show something that was a quick fix, but that wasn't to be."

Adds Holly, "It was heartbreaking because leukaemia in a newborn is extremely rare - they couldn't give us answers. But I always knew she would fight and survive. She's amazing."

Doctors noticed Ava had an unusual rash.

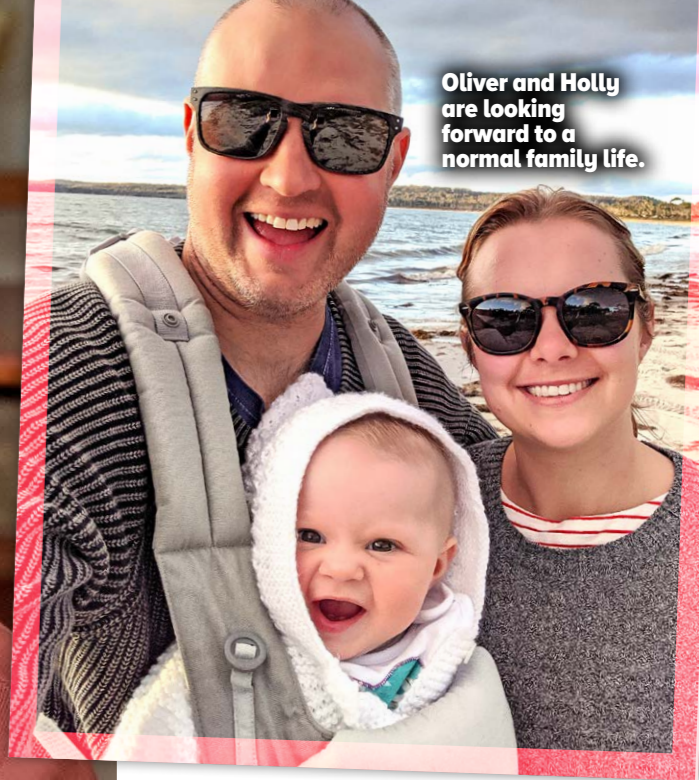


Despite 68 doses of chemo, the newborn kept on smiling.



She beat all the odds!

Oliver and Holly are looking forward to a normal family life.



'We've kept a diary for her so she knows how much she's overcome'

Over the next six months Ava endured four cycles of intense chemotherapy. "I think she had 68 doses of chemo. Some days she had chemo three times," says Holly, who was in awe of her little girl's happy demeanour during that tough time.

"Her smile was such a source of strength for us," says Oliver. "We've kept a diary for her so she knows how much she's overcome and just how strong she is."

Holly and Oliver say they couldn't have soldiered on without the help of family, friends and the Koala Kids Foundation, a volunteer-driven organisation that provides therapeutic resources, family support and engaging activities for children undergoing cancer treatment.

"It was a light in the darkness to bring you out when you're having a bad day," says Oliver. "The Koala Kids morning teas were something to look forward to, and a chance to sit down with other families and chat about things you're going through."

"You can't be strong for your child if you're not looking after yourself."

The family finally returned home from Melbourne to New Town, Hobart, in April this year after Ava was declared cancer-free. Since then, they've been enjoying settling back in to a normal routine.

"Bringing her home was a huge relief," says Holly. "This journey has highlighted how lovely the simple things are in life."