

Donna wins fight for life

As a new mum, Donna Coe expected there would be some bumps in the road. Sleepless nights, dirty nappies, crying – the usual territory with a baby. But she didn't predict having to fight for her own life. ELISA MILLER reports.

IN Donna Coe's own words, it was all going smoothly right up until she got a headache.

The young Narre Warren South woman had just given birth to a beautiful, healthy girl and was preparing to leave hospital and begin her new "family life" with husband Terrance.

But a headache developed into three generalised tonic clonic seizures.

She had suffered an ischemic stroke with right side neglect, leaving her unable to feel anything down the right side of her body.

"It all happened so quickly. We were so excited about having a baby and then the next minute I was spending weeks, nearly months, in hospital recovering from a stroke," says Donna, 34.

"The bright side is that we were lucky to have Makayla. But, for me, the worst thing was not actually remembering that I had had a baby. That was very upsetting for Terrance"

Donna is one of nearly 10 per cent of pregnant women who are diagnosed

with symptoms of pre-eclampsia — although in her case it is known as post-partum eclampsia, affecting the mother after the birth.

"I would hate to think what might have happened if I had gone home, as planned, and not been in hospital."

Following weeks in rehabilitation at Monash Medical Centre and then later in Dandenong Hospital, Donna finally returned home to Terrance and Makayla to begin her long journey to recovery.

"I had dyslexia, trouble with my speech, I had to learn how to write again, and naturally I couldn't drive, but the only thing I wanted to do was be at home with my baby. I felt I had already missed so much," says Donna.

"The best rehab for me was just being with Makayla; watching her learn helped me to learn. To me, this all happened for a reason. Makayla is here for a reason. She's my incentive to live."

It's been almost a year since Makayla's birth and Donna is almost fully recovered. She now makes light of



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some recurring problems associated with the stroke.

"My leg still goes a bit numb sometimes. And last week, I wore one of my slippers to bed without knowing — just little things like that. When I'm tired or flustered, I can also have trouble with my speech, but I'm pretty much back to doing everything I was before the stroke."

Donna says triumph over adversity may run in her family as her mother was one of the first women in New

Zealand to give birth while on kidney dialysis.

A history of kidney problems puts people at higher risk of pre-eclampsia, but Donna and Terrance hope to have more children and have been told they should be fine.

"I just hope that if anything can come out of this experience, it's that we can tell our story and then that may help prevent a tragedy in the future for another young couple like us."

This week is National Pre Eclampsia Awareness Week. Australian Action on Pre-eclampsia, a voluntary organisation, holds the week to raise awareness and educate mothers, as well as health professionals, about this condition that claims up to 200 Australian babies each year.

For more details, visit the website www.aapec.org.au



Donna Coe feels blessed to have a healthy and happy daughter, Makayla. Above: Donna wants other mums-to-be to learn from her harrowing experience. Pictures: Michael Copp