

TAMARA RIDES OUT FOR TINY BABIES

By the time you read this column, TV personality Tamara Beckwith and her husband Giorgio Veroni hope to have completed the annual London to Brighton Bike Ride, organised by the British Heart Foundation (bhf.org.uk). For the past seven weeks, the pair have been in training – spinning, eating healthily, not drinking alcohol and, for Tamara, ‘cutting out the crisps and chocolate’ (although she confesses to keeping a little stash of chocolate flakes).

The reason for ‘this madness’ is Tamara’s best friend Linda Johnston – or rather Lucas, one of Linda’s twin sons. Lucas suffers from a congenital heart condition called Tetralogy of Fallot, which accounts for between three and eight per cent of all newborn heart defects – about 300 each year in this country. (Nearly one baby in a hundred here is born with a heart defect, and half of these will need treatment.) Tamara, 40 and mother of two daughters (Anouska, 23, and Violet, one), is passionate about helping Linda and her husband Nick raise funds for the Evelina Children’s Hospital in London, where Lucas was treated.

Paediatric cardiologist John Simpson (Lucas’s doctor) explains: ‘Etienne-Louis Fallot was the 19th-century physician who first described this condition, which has four [hence the Greek prefix ‘tetra’] components. The two most significant are a hole between the pumping chambers of the heart and a narrowing of the main blood vessel to the lungs. It occurs due to an error in the development of the foetus, so the condition is often diagnosed before birth; with Lucas it was at 20 weeks. We don’t know the exact cause – although identical twins are known to have an increased incidence of heart problems generally – but the result is that after the baby is born, the level of oxygen in the blood is lower than normal. If severe, this can deprive vital organs and may be life threatening.’

Every baby with Tetralogy of Fallot will need surgery to normalise their blood-oxygen level and the flow

patterns within their heart. Linda had a difficult pregnancy but managed to keep Lucas and his twin Titus (who was not affected) on board until nearly 37 weeks, giving Lucas a good start. Although his first few days went well and the twins were allowed home from London’s St Thomas’ Hospital a week after their birth at the end of March 2007, Dr Simpson gave Linda and Nick a list of signs to look out for and, at six weeks, Lucas turned very blue due to a lack of oxygen in his blood. It was time for his first operation: a shunt to increase oxygen levels. (This particular shunt is a Gore-Tex tube placed between the artery to the arm and one of the arteries to the lungs.) From then on, Lucas had countless hospital visits, culminating in corrective bypass surgery in early October 2007, when he was seven months old. Surgeon David Anderson opened up the baby’s heart and completely ‘replumbed’ it, enlarging an artery, creating a new valve and closing the hole.

Since then, Lucas has gone from strength to strength. He started school last September, he’s been skiing and he rushes around on his Thomas & Friends bike (although it’s a bit too small for long-distance cycling, so he won’t be riding it to Brighton).

Tamara and the rest of the 30-strong Lucas Johnston Bike Ride team aim to raise £85,000 to pay for state-of-the-art miniaturised equipment that will give more tiny, critically ill babies with high-risk conditions the best chance of life. ‘We’ve all had quite late babies and we’re so aware of how vulnerable – and how precious – these little ones are,’ says Tamara.

Evelina Children’s Hospital Appeal is part of Guy’s and St Thomas’ Charity; for more details visit gsttcharity.org.uk

REDRESS YOUR BALANCE

My yoga-loving colleague is delighted to have discovered a range of yoga and pilates classes by top British and American teachers on specialist TV channel Body in Balance (Sky 275). They offer a great way to practise at home whenever you like – without spending a fortune on DVDs. Sky Plus viewers can record their favourite classes to suit their timetables, and the rest of us will also be able to tune in live at bodyinbalance.tv when its web TV service launches later this year.



HEALTH NOTES

SARAH STACEY



E-mail Sarah at s.stacey@you.co.uk

Sarah reads all your e-mails but regrets that she cannot answer them all personally

Illustration NILA AYE

ROUGH AND SOOTHE

A reader asks if there’s a natural remedy for vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odour. Pharmacist Shabir Daya suggests trying Bio-Fem Active Gel, which may also help itching, irritation, sensitivity, redness and soreness, as well as preventing thrush. Bio-Fem Active Gel, £9.99 for 50ml, from Victoria Health, tel: 0800 389 8195, victoriahealth.com.

BOOK OF THE WEEK: FOOD RULES by Michael Pollan (Penguin, £4.99)*

This specialist food writer and researcher has synthesised everything he knows about eating well into seven words: ‘Eat Food. Not too much. Mainly plants.’ For those who want a tad more, this concise book sets out his 64 basic rules of healthy eating, culled from grandmothers, folk wisdom, science and common sense. All you need to know.