

(introductory music)

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MARYN: Welcome to Indie Birth's series of podcasts here on iTunes, *Taking Back Birth*. Hi, everyone. Maryn here after a little hiatus. I almost forgot how this podcast started. So I've been busy as I'm sure many of you have just with life and lots of births lately and also our midwifery school. So I'm forcing a nice break for myself and that includes a break from births for a couple of months and a break from teaching for a couple of months. So I hope to get more podcasts out there in the new—near future. But I thought today was a good way of starting off on the right foot so that maybe I'd be inspired to keep it pretty regular over here.

Today I wanted to talk about pregnancy tests. Who isn't intrigued by pregnancy tests? It's kind of a fun and big topic. I think on a daily basis in the kind of groups that I'm in any way on social media not a day goes by where somebody doesn't post a photo of usually a positive pregnancy test. So it's something that most of us are using in our lives. We all know what they are and what that means. So just wanting to kind of dissect it a little today. Maybe some anecdotes. I am going to go through my own personal stories about pregnancy tests. My thoughts on the whole thing as well as some history, which was really fun to do some very minimal research on.

So I first started out by thinking why is this a thing. So pretty obvious, but, again, just picking it apart. So pregnancy is so mysterious that when we see that positive line or the word even, pregnant, it confirms that there is an internal process going on that we can't see yet. And sometimes this process is suspected, and sometimes it's really unsuspected. And it's a total surprise. Lots of reasons for that I think. Usually, people don't have a great knowledge or connection to their own cycles. I think that's a huge part of it. And some do, but maybe they're not having a cycle. I'll talk about some of my experience of not even having cycles in between getting pregnant. And then finally—nor not finally, but lots of women have erratic cycles. So they might be trying to chart them or whatever but to no avail. And sometimes it's just because people do have pregnancy symptoms so wanting to figure out what's going on in their bodies and using that as a tool. I think it can be a fun tool in lots of ways. And there can be lots of cool elements of it being an autonomous thing to do which I'll talk more about when I go through some of the history.

So I'm going to share my own journey through pregnancy test land as I call it because it's been quite an evolution. And I think the whole idea of not taking a pregnancy test, which I'll eventually get to, is kind of rare and not that that's like some badge of honor.

It's just it's kind of rare. Even my most trusting friends or all of these lovely ladies that I get to see here I can't remember the last time or ever that somebody came pregnant and said, "I didn't take a test. I did these other things." Usually, it's a very concrete, "I took a pregnancy test on this date." So my own journey, of course, began with my first pregnancy. And I had just come off of birth control. I was on that for a couple of years. Never to return again for good reason. But I remember coming off and being in New York City, which is where I lived at the time, and sitting in a giant Barnes and Noble, which also might be a thing of the past. I don't really know. But a giant bookstore and reading *Taking Charge of Your Fertility* by Toni Weschler from cover to cover sitting right there reading it. And then, of course, I bought it, and I read it cover to cover probably 100 more times. In fact, I still have that copy. It's nearly 16 years old now, and it is quite the tattered copy of this amazing book.

So that book really changed my life in a lot of ways. And that's probably a separate podcast. But it didn't help me figure out what was going on in my own body soon enough because I had come off birth control. And she even says in the book if you're coming off birth control, basically, it can be really confusing to chart your cycle. That you might not ovulate for awhile. And so I assumed that's what was going on. I came off the birth control. Obviously, I got a period. And then I didn't get another period. And so I had this weighing in my mind as what was going on. And part of me just figured, "Oh, it's the birth control. I don't really know what my body is doing." And then in hindsight, I think I totally knew that I was pregnant. So I did take a pregnancy test because I didn't know that there would be anything else to do. I never considered it.

And for my first pregnancy, I didn't have anything to compare it to, so I didn't have any overtly pregnant symptoms really when I look back. I had a really easy first pregnancy. So I didn't feel nauseous. I didn't have a lot of the telltale symptoms. I remember feeling this heaviness in my pelvis and not being in pain or anything. But thinking, "Well, maybe I have a UTI," which wouldn't have been normal for me. But I was just kind of trying to feel into what was going on during this time where I wasn't bleeding. So lo and behold, I went across the street to the Duane Reade, which is a pharmacy in New York, and bought a pregnancy test.

And I remember just that feeling—how that feels to buy a pregnancy test. You think everybody cares and is wondering what's going on with you kind of thing. I don't remember that anybody cared when I bought my pregnancy test. But I brought it home, obviously. And I peed on it right away. I didn't wait or do anything that's probably suggested. And it was immediately positive. So as time went on and I visited a doctor, et cetera, et cetera, I was probably about six weeks at the time that I took the test. So I really hadn't been pregnant that long, but a couple weeks had passed. And I'll never forget that moment. I think there's a lot of cool nostalgia around pregnancy tests that most of us have. And so I'm not poo pooing that at all. I have very good memories of

getting this positive test. I could tell you exactly where I was standing. I was in my bathroom. And I could tell you exactly what happened next which was I called my husband, who was working.

So it's very good memories and very clear that that pregnancy test—just visually seeing the positive—was a huge point in life. It was hugely poignant and special and memorable, and I think—I think I even still have that pregnancy test somewhere. I think I taped it to her pregnancy journal, and she'll be 16. So that pregnancy test really does still exist. And like I said, very good memories. And all that goes into seeing that positive test. All the dreams and hopes and big ideas and visions that come in for most women when they see just that simple line. So I think back if I could be that version of myself again I still would have used a pregnancy test because, for me, it made it real when it was something totally new and something I had never experienced before. I feel like it helped organize my experience, which I think a lot of women that are taking pregnancy tests can relate too, right? It's like, "Oh, this is the moment when I can't do that anymore," or, "This is the moment when I care more about this," or just a realization, "Oh, that's why I'm so tired." Whatever it is. So I have no regrets about that. It was an awesome experience. And, of course, it was proof that this was actually happening.

So progressing through the next couple of pregnancies, number two and number three, I was tracking my fertility. I could still, believe it or not, pull out the written fertility charts that I had. So when I was reflecting on this, I laughed kind of at myself because I had these charts. And if you know anything about charting or even if you don't, I guess I can give you a little bit of a primer here just so you know what I'm talking about. But if you're charting your cycles and you're taking temperatures every morning, then your temperature usually drops when you're about to bleed either the day before or maybe right on that morning. So in other words, if you have high temperatures which only happen after ovulation—if you have high temperatures for—I think they say more than like 17 days you're most definitely pregnant unless you have something super weird going on which is very rare because that's a sign of pregnancy.

So I was seeing in this in my own charts, and I also was super confident that I was pregnant. I was one of those people, at least in my earlier years, that got pregnant on the first try with pretty my first four or five kids. So I had honestly never seen a negative test in my own life. So I just assumed I was pregnant. And I felt sort of pregnant. And my temperatures didn't go down. But somehow I still peed on a stick. And I don't really know why other than maybe I just wanted the confirmation of that. Maybe I felt like I was crazy or something and just wanted to see that. So all of those things. But I remember being as excited in a lot of ways in seeing that positive test with the second and third.

So the fourth was a bit of a wild card as was his birth. But I did not have a cycle in between babies three and four, so I remember when my number three was approaching 18 months I finally had some signs of ovulation. It had taken that long. And that wasn't typical for me. It was longer than normal but whatever. Still normal. And so to make a long story short, I got pregnant without ever having bled. I got pregnant right on that first ovulation. And I knew that I was ovulating. Lots of women are more confused, I think, with their cycles with breastfeeding. And that's totally legitimate. I'm not looking down on that at all. My body though is very clear about ovulation. And so I can't miss even if I wanted to, and I haven't missed it. Sometimes I think it would be nice to be less—I don't know. In tune. Or if my body didn't give me as great signs, but I know that that can be confusing too for women that don't have good signs and then they don't really know when they got pregnant in between births and breastfeeding and all that.

But anyway, I did know that I had ovulated even though I hadn't bled. Of course, you can most definitely ovulate before you bleed especially when you go that long into your postpartum. And so I remember doing the same thing. Tracking my temperature, and it was very elevated for way past when it should be. And being like, "Wow. Okay. I'm pregnant." And I remember saying something to the midwife I worked with actually. And I can tell you exactly where I was sitting and what I was doing when I told her because she totally doubted me and said, "Oh, well, I mean I don't—you haven't had a cycle back yet. So how do you know," kind of thing. And that was very demeaning but whatever. It wasn't really her business. And, of course, I was pregnant. But I went to go get a pregnancy test. In fact, I remember where I went for that one. It was in Flagstaff, Arizona. And I remember going to this kind of deserted CVS and buying a test.

And so I peed on the stick, and it was negative. And that was very surprising. But I didn't let it bother me. I have all kinds of weird journals around this kind of stuff. I keep lots of journals in general. But I have books and books of pregnancy journals. And so I even wrote down, "I'm not worried. I'm totally pregnant, and I don't really care what the test says." So indeed, I was right. And I birthed a baby nine months later. Never—I didn't try again. So I got that one negative test. Either it was too early or it was just plain old wrong. But it didn't really shake my confidence. And so there's that.

The fifth baby came pretty soon after the fourth, and it was a similar type thing. I never bled again. So at this point, I hadn't had a period in—I don't know. Three years or something. And so I went right into the fifth pregnancy in the same way. I knew that I had ovulated. My temperature stayed up. And I didn't take a test. And this was the first time that I hadn't although I kind of felt like an old pro at the whole thing. But it was an interesting thing to consider in my brain. Do I need to do that? Why would I do that? Why would I even go buy a test just so it can tell me what I already know? So I didn't. After her, I had an early miscarriage. And I mean after her birth. So a couple years

later. And that was number five. And number six technically was an early miscarriage. And it was the same thing once again. So my temperature stayed up. I knew I was pregnant. I felt kind of weird, but I was just sort of waiting for it to settle. And then I started bleeding around what would be five weeks. So I hadn't taken a test. And I think that's where, if you don't chart, you can just think, "Well, I had a really late period." I know people say that about early miscarriages. And sometimes it's true. Sometimes we really do ovulate later, but I knew when that had happened. So it was definitely an early miscarriage.

And funny enough or not really funny, but I did end up peeing on a stick while I was actually bleeding. And I don't know why I did that exactly. I think I wanted to just see what it said which sounds weird. But it was positive. So it gave me some peace of mind and was actually hard to see. Just seeing a positive while I was actually bleeding and knowing that I wasn't pregnant anymore. So that was my first taste of bad pregnancy test medicine, if there is such a thing. So it just kind of turned me off to them altogether being like what's the point of these things. If we're losing a baby, we can still test positive. And there's something really hard mentally and emotionally about that. And I've heard other women say the same. While they're actually miscarrying, it's not helpful to see that because you already know what's happening.

So that happened. And then my next pregnancy was Evie, and that was a similar—like the last few had been although there was one difference actually now that I'm reading it. I didn't even take temperatures with her. I just knew when I was ovulating. And a period never came 14 days after that. And I knew I was pregnant. I didn't do any temps. I didn't do any tests. I just tried to be in a place of patience and trust which was hard especially after having had a loss. Although I left a person out. How terrible of me. I left my son, True, out. So I had the loss. And then I had True, who was similar. Temp stayed up. No test. And now Evie.

So she wasn't directly after a miscarriage, but still it was imploring me to trust and listen in a different way. And of course, don't think I'm saying that if you take pregnancy tests you're not trusting or listening. I feel like I did a lot of that too. But I just had the kind of evolution through it that got me to a place where I didn't even want to test. And you could even argue that that in and of itself had an element of fear in it. And I wouldn't argue with you. There is something to me about seeing a test and then facing the possibility of loss that I think is really hard. I think I've decided, for me, I'd rather just not see it. It doesn't make it any less real, of course, really. It's still hard when babies don't stay. But that's what I've come to.

And then, of course, there was Sable, who most people know was a later miscarriage. And I never took a test with him either. But he grew for a couple of months until he didn't. And then I had a similar kind of science experiment brain going on as weird as

that might sound. Once he was in there for a couple of months not alive, one day I decided to take a test just—I was curious. Do I still have hCG? And, of course, I did. And, of course, that's kind of a dumb question because that's part of why the body will hold on to a missed miscarriage is the hCG just doesn't go down. But anyway, it felt like some kind of thing that I should do. So I did take one, and it was positive, which made me laugh actually in a weird, dark kind of way and really brought to my attention that not to be a negative Nellie here or burst anyone's bubble but, obviously, a positive pregnancy test one day doesn't really mean anything. It doesn't mean anything. And the naïve place that I maybe was a long time ago where a positive pregnancy test means a baby. Most of the time it does. But sometimes it doesn't. And so I guess just, for me, feeling like I emotionally needed some distance from the whole lot of things like that.

So not to say they're bad. It's just the evolution and the experience of things. So with Deva, the same thing. I didn't take a test. I didn't do temperatures at all. I think by the time you've had 11 pregnancies, which is what she was, I think there is usually a pretty good awareness of the body, of the cycles, of the little things that can mean something. Altogether coupled with the fact that sometimes I really feel like I know nothing. And there has been months in the last couple of years where I've thought, "Oh, I'm definitely pregnant," like I feel X, Y, and Z. And I'm not. And then with Deva's pregnancy, as far as symptoms went before I thought, "Oh no. I'm definitely not pregnant," and I was. So I don't have the answers to any of that. I think there is something about obsessing if you do during that two week wait as they call it that's just part of being human. And although they make pregnancy tests now that can test a lot earlier, I'm personally just not interested in them. I think it's worth the wait mostly, and it's kind of a fun and unnerving obsessive game to play sometimes. But that's what it is. And I would not choose anything else, if more future pregnancies come my way.

Also with Deva, I had a really, really intense dream probably the day that she implanted. So I've learned to pay more attention to my dreams, in particular, as far as being a homemade pregnancy test. And although my intuition can be wrong and then I don't even know if it is intuition, but it's more like you're trying to interpret. I don't know that it's even intuition. You're trying to interpret symptoms when pregnancy symptoms and premenstrual symptoms really overlap, and we all know this. But I've learned to pay more attention to my dreams. And nearly every month that I am going to get a period whether it's because there's no chance of pregnancy or just because I'm not pregnant despite wanting to be perhaps, I'll dream of bleeding. And I think that's a pretty common and cool thing if you're paying attention and tracking your dreams and tracking your dreams along with your cycles. And that doesn't just go for the bleeding phase even. You might have certain types of dreams at certain parts of your cycle just routinely for you no matter what.

Pregnancy dreams, of course, I think are really normal and common to have around ovulation time too. And it doesn't mean, at least for me, that I'm always pregnant, but it just means that that's where I am in the cycle. But the dream that Deva brought to me was kind of unlike other dreams, and it wasn't at ovulation. It was about a week past. And I remember just holding the dream close and journaling about it and thinking, "I don't know. I don't necessarily feel pregnant at this moment. I mean it's way too early, but this dream was pretty convincing." And, of course, I was pregnant. So everyone is different. Everyone has all their own stories. And I really don't think there is a right way to use a pregnancy test or not. I mean obviously there's only way to use these kinds of home pregnancy tests. But I mean there isn't a right way to determine if that's the right choice or if it's not a good choice or if it's taking you away from your center and your own intuition or if it's putting you in touch with that.

I can totally see how people are comforted by pregnancy tests even if I'm not. And I can see how it might be really crucial for some women to have this information sooner than later. So another point to bring up is just that the attention to the way cycles work and getting that information out there, at least to where young girls, the ones that want it and if they're already having normal cycles then explaining the way it works. I sure wish someone had told me, however many years ago that was—30 years ago—about any of these things because I think right off the bat my experiences would have been different. And although I may have chosen the same thing like peeing on a stick, I feel like I would have done it a little bit more consciously had I had information about the way my body works and the signs and symptoms that were already there.

So I do want to go over a little bit of pregnancy test history. Listen to me. I sound like I'm teaching. No. I'm not teaching. I'm off duty as a teacher right now. But the history is a really cool discussion. And if you want to know more, you can totally just Google it like I did. Not hard. But I haven't really ever taken the time to do that, so I wanted to share a little bit about what I learned. Because I think sometimes it's easy—or I mean all the time it's easy to just be where we are. So I could easily approach this just as a pregnancy test take you away from your intuition and our—my whole deal is connect yourself with your internal. Don't look to the outside to make these external acknowledgements for you. And I think that's definitely part of this conversation. But the pregnancy history or pregnancy test history rather really sheds some light on an entirely different topic which is that a pregnancy test particularly the kind that are used at home, which is really what I'm talking about today can feel like a really cool and autonomous tool. And that's how they came into the world.

So the history in general is pretty intense. And so you should go read about that, if you want to. Many people know—and I did know this little tidbit although I didn't know much else. That the earliest pregnancy tests have been traced back to Egyptian times. So that's really cool. So women have always been women. And women have always

wanted to know this. And I think that's really cool that that's this ancient thread that connects our history as childbearing people. So the ancient test, as far as I understand it, was they would have—women would pee—it was still a pee test. They would pee on barley and, I think, wheat. Yes. So if the wheat grew, then they believed that the woman was having a girl. And if the barley grew after peed on, they believed it was boy. And if neither plant sprouted, obviously, then she wasn't pregnant. So that's kind of a cool thing.

It sounds like in 16th century Europe there were actually specialists. And I'm guessing they were men, but I, honestly, do not know. Anyway they called them—get ready for this piss prophets. So it was a pee test again. And they would read urine like tea leaves, so probably like the design that the urine would make in some way, shape, or form. And then by the appearance alone, whoever this piss prophet was, would determine whether or not the woman was pregnant. So I find this fascinating—this kind of history. I think it's cool that this has been around for so long. I also think it's interesting how in both those scenarios it was something outside of the woman. And in the case of a piss prophet, whether that person was male or female, it was still someone else saying this is what's happening with you because that's really turned into quite the epidemic as we all know.

So there's a lot more history there that you could read up on just like how those tests changed over time. But I think the general idea is that as we are approaching or were approaching modern times primarily doctors and scientists were trying to determine what was it about the pregnant woman's urine. What were they actually looking for? So in 1920, they discovered that it was hCG. So kind of from then that point on what it seems like to me is that the different testing methods were very complex. They needed to take place in labs with all of this different equipment. And essentially, it was out of the hands of any woman. So it was in the hands of a doctor or a scientist. And she really wasn't able to utilize this information on her own timing or in the privacy of her own home.

And that's something that, again, was surprising to me. That this really was a very feminist evolution. The home pregnancy test. So I guess the first one hit shelves of the stores in 1970s, which honestly isn't that far before I was born. So it was called The Predictor. The Predictor pregnancy test. It was made by Organon Pharmaceuticals, and it was \$10, which probably was a lot of money back in the seventies honestly. There's a lot you can read about it online. The article that I found was really written because the original prototype was being auctioned when this article was written. And it was being auctioned for \$11,000. So here is a really cool fact. This Predictor was created by a woman. Her name was Margaret Crane, and she had been hired with this company to work on a new cosmetics line. So that's funny, right? They hired her to make make up. And when she was in the lab, she noticed that there were all these test

tubes and all kinds of chemicals and pregnant women's urine and all this technology set up. And she was inspired despite her initial role at this company to develop a simplified version of the test.

So she developed the first home pregnancy test at her home in New York using a couple of tools. And then in 1969 after she had presented it to the company, they applied for a patent in her name. So that's really cool. And they have her, this woman Margaret Crane, as quote as saying, "A woman should be able to do that herself." So that's really awesome, isn't it? Really awesome. We don't know in this day and age how it feels to not have access to something like a pregnancy test that is huge. It's going to change your life. It may be desired. It may not be desired. Can you imagine if this really wasn't available to us? And we couldn't just walk into Walgreens or whatever and buy one and we really needed someone's permission? And then we needed to share that information with whoever had given us permission? So we all need to probably thank Margaret Crane for developing this and giving women autonomy in this regard.

So I was going to talk about some other things here. Obviously, the technology has stayed a lot the same with all kinds of different testing options now as far as you can test earlier and earlier after alleged conception than you ever could before. And even when I started my midwifery apprenticeship 13 years ago, we would always ask women when did you get a positive pregnancy test when we were trying to put their dates together, if they were needing help with them. And back in that day, even 13 years ago, you could only get a positive test at 4 weeks of pregnancy. I mean certainly you could get one later. But the earliest you could get one was 4 weeks, and it's not that way anymore. And honestly, I'm not completely up on all the technology nowadays. I know that you can test a lot earlier. I know that there are tests that actually tell you probably by the level of hCG in your urine approximately how many weeks pregnant you are.

So it certainly has changed and evolved. But I liked this quote. I had found this one article online from theatlantic.com where it talks about the history of pregnant—of home pregnancy tests. And the article says, "Unlike medical tests that reveal something otherwise knowable about a body, a pregnancy test can only speed the delivery of information." I thought that was a really easy way to say it. In 1978—remember the home pregnancy test hadn't been around for more than eight to ten years at this point—an ad called the test in quote "a private little revolution that any woman can easily buy at her drug store." And that this test offered "privacy, autonomy, and knowledge of one's own body." So that wraps up the historical review of home pregnancy tests here on *Taking Back Birth*. Again, I think it's not one or the other. We are in time now where we are. And so I'm going to leave you all with a little question, which is how does our generation or multiple generations that are represented here listening to this podcast—how do we want to view this technology? Do we care at all? Maybe it's not important.

I think it can go a lot of ways. Either it's just not important, and it's no big deal. Or you just like to think about these things like I do, and it is either a tool to help us be autonomous in this thing called pregnancy and birth when women really still don't have very much autonomy. Again, it's one of the few things that a woman can do to confirm something this huge in the privacy of her own home without a doctor's prescription, without a doctor's knowing. And along those lines, of course, we've developed blood serum tests at this point and ultrasound and all these other tools that are available but do not give us autonomy or privacy. So truly, the pregnancy test is unique in that it's remained that way. And then the flip side of the coin is kind of how I started this podcast which is but does it take us away from our internal process. Is it actually a hindrance that can start women separating themselves from this internal experience from the very first moment?

So I don't have the answer. I think it can be both. I think it can be each of those things at different times. And in the end, it's really something that each of us decides for ourselves, and we each have our own journey through the land of pregnancy tests. Thanks for listening. It's good to be back on this podcast. I love to hear from you. Maryn@indiebirth.org. And I hope you have a great day.

(closing music)