

Tot may need transplant



WON'T GIVE UP: Marie Unis kisses her daughter Emma, 1, at their family's home. Emma recently had heart surgery.

Star photo: Brent Foster

Infant battles back after heart surgery

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Baby Emma Unis, who only one month ago underwent open-heart surgery in Toronto, may now soon face a heart transplant.

While the 13-month-old Forest Glade girl's parents, Marie and Gary, remain hopeful her condition will improve without another major operation, her lungs are still retaining dangerous amounts of fluid, which cannot be allowed to continue.

"We're hoping that with more time things will clear up," Marie said at her home, with three of her eight children buzzing around. "The repair

went well. They were able to patch the hole and take out the membrane.

"But when we went back to London for a follow-up and they did another chest X-ray and echo (cardiogram) they found she still had quite a lot of fluid in her lungs and the heart hadn't started to go back to normal size."

On April 27, doctors diagnosed a heart condition called cor triatriatum, meaning she has three chambers instead of four. Plus, a membrane that was suppose to dissolve at seven weeks gestation has just a small hole.

PLEASE SEE **LITTLE FIGHTER** / A4

Little fighter

CONTINUED FROM A1

The dosage was significantly increased a week and a half ago, but things have not yet improved.

"The reason the fluid is in the lungs is the heart's not functioning the way it should," Marie said. "If they do the next X-ray and the heart is still not going to normal size, there's nothing else they can do to fix it — except a transplant.

"By that time she will have been on Lasix for almost eight weeks and if she still has all that fluid, obviously it's just not working."

Marie said neonatal specialist Dr. Godfrey Bacheyie remains optimistic and will not yet discuss such things as the likelihood of finding an appropriate heart for a year-old baby who weighs only 13 pounds and is roughly the size of a three-month-old.

Doctors speculate Emma may also have cerebral palsy, since she still cannot sit up, much less walk around, although that might be a result of developmental delays since her tiny body has to expend most of its energy on simply staying alive.

"I don't get much sleep," Marie said. "Trying to feed her is hard. She has very low endurance. She gets tired easily. She doesn't have enough suction for a bottle. I have to feed her with a syringe, which takes about two hours.

"It's sad, because other one-year-olds are starting to run around but she can't do anything. But I'm hoping she'll catch up."

In pain

Emma has a vertical scar that runs the length of her chest, and is still in too much pain to lie on her stomach.

Marie said she thanks the community for all the support that has come from her story appearing in The Star and the Mom2mom.ca website — something she says made the journey more bearable.

People have donated money, since recurring travel expenses, lodging and babysitting are not covered by the government, as well as dinners and babysitting services.

A heating-cooling company even cleaned out the family home's ducts for free to make sure baby Emma was breathing clean air.

Still, the bills will continue to mount if Emma requires a heart transplant at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto.

But the biggest inspiration the family has for persevering is baby Emma herself.

Despite what the little girl has already endured in her short and difficult life, she can still flash an award-winning smile under big Gerber baby blue eyes that warm the heart.

"She's a happy baby, she smiles a lot," Marie said. "At first, after the operation, I couldn't cuddle with her, but now I can and it feels so good."