The Fourth Trimester: A Guide to Healthy Postpartum Recovery

Written by Courtney Meltvedt, D.C.

Sunday, 01 March 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 09:13

The journey that a woman takes with her baby during pregnancy is a special and sacred time. Many women devote a considerable amount of time preparing for the day of the birth, as well as stocking the house with baby supplies. While we must prepare for baby, we cannot forget about Mom. A healthy postpartum recovery is essential to help establish breastfeeding, help the family adjust to the newest addition (whether it’s the first child or beyond), and to promote the mother’s emotional and physical health. There are many simple but important elements to aid in a good recovery. Here are seven things that you can do before and shortly after birth to pave the way for a smooth transition in your fourth trimester.
The purpose of this guide is to set you up for the greatest success possible. Some problems that arise in the postpartum period are extreme fatigue, anemia, pain, difficulty breastfeeding, and postpartum depression. The advice given in this guide is designed to act as preventative measures. If you find that you are experiencing any of the above problems, please seek professional help immediately. That said, many of these problems can be prevented.

Food

First and foremost, you will need lots and lots of food! One of the most difficult tasks after the arrival of a new baby is cooking and preparing food. If you thought you were hungry during pregnancy, just wait until you start breastfeeding! You might find yourself eating even more. Breastfeeding burns approximately 500 calories a day, but in addition to nourishing a baby, you must nourish yourself. Your body needs lots of high-quality, nutritious food while you journey through your postpartum. Therefore, it is a much-needed part of the nesting process to pre-cook or pre-mix meals and freeze them. Many new parents skip this part of the preparation process, thinking that they will just order takeout, but not only does that get expensive quickly, it can be just as much of a hassle to load and unload your new baby for the car trip to pick up food. And not all babies like the car.

If you can afford it and have the space, consider getting a full-size freezer. Not only is it great to have space to store lots of frozen meals for after your birth, but as your family grows, it helps to have more cold food storage for the future because there will be more mouths to feed. Freezable slow-cooker recipes are a great way to make large meals that will provide leftovers for several days. It’s also easy to freeze lasagnas and casseroles, fruits, vegetables and soups. Also consider finding a local farm with a CSA (community supported agriculture) program; you can have fresh fruit and veggies delivered to your door weekly. Try to find farms that grow organic, non-GMO food so that you and your baby are eating clean. Many farms allow you to choose what you would like in your weekly delivery. For the fourth trimester, choose items that are easy to prepare. It is ideal to lightly cook veggies to soften them; this is gentler on your intestines and helps your body conserve energy while you are healing.

Another great way to have food come to your door is to set up a meal train. This is a program where friends and family can choose a day to bring you a meal and sign up on an online calendar. This way you get a big hug with your food.
Remember that now is not the time to diet or attempt to lose weight by restricting food intake. It is far healthier for a woman to eat a hearty, healthful diet during pregnancy and to gain 40 to 60 pounds, than the outdated recommendation of only gaining 20 to 30 pounds. If a woman is eating a healthy, balanced, nutrient-rich diet that includes healthy fats (coconut oil, olive oil, grass-fed butter) and high-quality protein, she could gain more or less. The point is that you do not need to lose the weight as quickly as possible. It took nine months to put it on. Give yourself nine months (or more) to take it off. It is more important to rest and eat well during your fourth trimester. Spend time loving that beautiful new baby and have appreciation for what you have created.

Rest

One of the reasons it is great to have lots of stored food is that it allows you to spend more time resting. You might be tempted to return to your pre-pregnancy activity and exercise levels, but your body needs rest. Many women feel “fine,” but when they do too much activity, they experience abnormal postpartum bleeding or spotting (that is not a menstrual cycle). This is your body telling you that you are overexerting yourself. Your uterus is still healing, and you need to rest more. It can be hard to gauge how much activity is too much when you feel great or simply have a day where you have extra energy, but postpartum spotting is a sign that must be respected. Take this entire trimester as recovery time.

Seasoned parents know that sleep is precious when you have a new baby. It can be tempting to do the chores that have piled up, but they can wait. Sleep when your baby sleeps. Ask friends and family members to help you with chores like dishes, laundry and vacuuming. Hire a postpartum doula to help with those things as well, and also to care for your baby so you can rest.

A great way to get more sleep is to co-sleep. There are many different ways to co-sleep. Co-sleeping simply means sleeping in the same room as your baby. It is important to research safe co-sleeping. No matter how you choose to do it, you will get more sleep with baby near you. You can respond to his cries faster, preventing him from becoming fully roused during the night, which helps train baby to sleep during the dark hours. Babies have to develop their circadian rhythm, and feeding your baby quickly before he is fully awakened will help both of you get back to sleep sooner. Most importantly, your baby will be more at ease with his mother nearby. Co-sleeping has also been shown to regulate breathing and heart rate for baby’s new developing system—an added bonus.
Overall, the more good quality sleep that the family can get, the better and more able each person will be to function at their best. More plainly, lack of sleep leads to more arguing between spouses, or battling with your older children, and this negativity does not help with the adjustment period.

**Chiropractic & Acupuncture**

During pregnancy, your spine and the soft tissues of your body undergo the most rapid transformation that they will go through in your entire life. The first part of this change happens over a nine-month period, but the second part of this change (the return to previous form) happens more rapidly, as the weight of the baby is suddenly no longer there. Your body is able to integrate these changes with more ease when you receive chiropractic care. In fact, many of the common symptoms during pregnancy, especially neck pain, back pain, headaches and heartburn, are related to the stress on your nervous system from this rapid change. Remember, the spine encases the central nervous system and when it is misaligned, it can put tension on the exiting nerves and decrease normal function. The same goes for the fourth trimester. Your spine is trying to adjust to the absence of the baby in your belly. Chiropractic adjustments aid beautifully in this process to realign your spine and pelvis.

Your spine is also very “soft” at the end of pregnancy. Your body has produced a hormone called relaxin to soften the joints and ligaments and allow for your pelvis to open wide and birth your baby. As you begin to nurse your baby and carry him in your arms, you may find that you feel back pain and headaches again because this softness allows your joints to become misaligned more easily. Once again, chiropractic is an excellent way to restore function and reduce pain and discomfort.

Acupuncture has wonderful benefits as well. In traditional Chinese medicine the cycles of life are viewed as Yin and Yang. Yin is a still, nurturing, restful state and Yang is a powerful, energetic, transformative state. Acupuncture focuses on supporting the body as it moves from one state to another and then back again. When a woman is pregnant, she is in the fullest Yin state that she will be in for her entire life as she grows a baby from scratch. Labor is the opposite. It is a state of Yang, and the woman uses all the energy she has stored during pregnancy to labor and birth her baby. Acupuncture supports a successful balance of energy so that the body can utilize it as best as possible and function optimally.

After the birth of baby, the body must recover from a certain amount of trauma. Even in a “perfect” birth, the body still sustains tissue trauma. The placenta detaches from the uterine...
wall, leaving a large “raw” area that must heal, and the vaginal tissue is stretched to its fullest state, sometimes tearing or receiving an episiotomy. A C-section birth also has incisions to heal. There is significant blood and fluid loss as well, and a tremendous amount of energy is spent. Acupuncture focuses on supporting the aftermath of this process and bringing the mother’s body back into a state of balance as it works to rebuild the blood, balance fluid levels, and heal the affected areas.

Chiropractic and acupuncture are very complimentary in providing the most well-rounded care for your body in the postpartum period. While chiropractic focuses on the significant structural changes and how they affect the nervous system, acupuncture taps into specific organ systems and affects them directly. By utilizing these methods of healthcare, you will keep your nerve system clear of any interference and the energy balanced in all the organs and tissues of the body. Both boost the immune system, which is weakened after childbirth, and both have the ability to boost your overall energy if you are feeling sluggish or help you sleep if you are overtired from hormone imbalance. As a result of receiving these types of care, many of the common abnormal postpartum signs and symptoms, such as persistent postpartum bleeding, low milk supply, painful hemorrhoids, depression, or pain and weakness, simply disappear.

Placenta Encapsulation

The birth of your baby is complete upon the expulsion of the placenta. Just as your baby has been with you for nine months, so has the placenta. It has been producing hormones for the majority of the pregnancy and it is a very drastic change for the body to lose this endocrine organ. The rapid shift in hormone levels can lead to what is commonly known as “the baby blues” or in more serious cases, postpartum depression.

Just as many animals eat their placentas after birth, it is becoming more and more common for women to find a professional to encapsulate their placenta so it can be consumed much like a vitamin supplement. Consuming your placenta has many wonderful benefits. It is essentially a big “bag” of bio-identical hormones that you can slowly consume over the course of your fourth trimester to ease the rapid change of losing the placenta and its hormone production. As an added bonus, the placenta is filled with some of the hormones that the mother produced during the birth process and those hormones are preserved in the tissue. The composition of the placenta is complex, but here is an abbreviated list of the ingredients that are relevant for postpartum recovery:
Prolactin: stimulates breast milk production

Oxytocin: stimulates uterine contraction, stimulates the milk-ejection reflex, promotes feelings of love and happiness

Prostaglandins: stimulates uterine contractions

Estrogen: stimulates development of mammary glands, increases serotonin levels in the brain (feeling of happiness), regulates endorphins (pain relief)

Hemoglobin: the iron-binding substance in red blood cells that carries oxygen to your tissues

Other components: regulate metabolism, reduce pain and inflammation, boost the immune system

Placenta consumption also stems postpartum bleeding because of its high oxytocin and prostaglandin content. It is normal to have postpartum bleeding that is like a heavy period. This bleeding normally lasts 10–14 days. However, it is common for women to have bleeding that lasts longer. This can be for reasons like too much activity, not enough good food, abnormal nerve function, or abnormal energy flow. This can lead to anemia, exhaustion, depression and difficulty breastfeeding. During the weeks that follow birth, a woman can utilize placenta capsules in large doses to stop excessive bleeding that goes beyond 14 days postpartum.
Again, the body must rebuild the blood supply and normalize the fluid levels during the postpartum period. The placenta aids in this action as well. The body has sustained blood loss from both the process of expelling the placenta as well as the blood contained in the placenta itself. This loss is a completely normal part of childbirth, and part of the postpartum healing is building new blood. This becomes even more critical in cases of hemorrhage. The body is already tired from its massive energy loss during labor, and now the perfect food to help restore your energy is actually the placenta. The placenta provides the perfect raw ingredients for your body to build more blood while simultaneously producing plenty of breast milk due to its high hemoglobin and prolactin content. Loss of blood, which can also be thought of as loss of fluids, affects breastfeeding. Persistent postpartum bleeding is associated with low milk supply because the body is continually losing fluid. Thus, taking placenta capsules to stop postpartum bleeds also boosts milk supply.

**Belly Binding**

Belly binding is an ancient custom that is practiced around the world, but is mostly absent in American culture. Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America have practiced belly binding for more than a thousand years. While this custom is often mistakenly thought of as an aesthetic practice, it is actually to provide support for the process of involution—the shrinking of the uterus to its approximate pre-pregnancy size, and to support abdominal muscles, ligaments and organs as they return to their previous sizes and positions.

Involution takes approximately six weeks. Once the placenta is birthed, the uterus clamps down to about the size of a large grapefruit. This is your body’s way of stopping the bleeding. It then relaxes slightly and begins to reduce in size by about one finger width every day. Over the next 4 to 6 weeks it will shrink back down to about the size of a pear.

Belly wrapping supports and speeds up the recovery process. The uterine muscle layers can become too relaxed and lose their tone. When this happens the uterus can be palpated in the abdomen and feels soft and boggy. This requires immediate massage to help the uterus tighten back down. A soft uterus can result in abnormal postpartum bleeding; belly binding can help to stem excess bleeding by preventing the uterine muscle from becoming too relaxed. In addition to supporting the uterus, the wrap also supports the other abdominal organs as they reposition themselves into their previous locations. As you carry your baby to term, your abdominal muscles also widen and stretch. This can sometimes result in diastasis recti—a separation of the abdominal muscles down the midline. Belly wrapping is very important to heal this type of issue. Improper healing can weaken core muscles and lead to significant back pain later on. A snug wrap aids in providing abdominal tone while the abdominal muscles restrengthen and return to their pre-pregnancy length.
Many women find a belly wrap or brace to be very comfortable because it helps eliminate that feeling like your guts are “falling out” in the first week or so after birth. It is ideal to start belly wrapping about 3 days postpartum until at least 8 weeks. Some women wrap for longer, giving the muscles and ligaments even more time to shrink, strengthen and stabilize. If you take your wrap off and find that you are spotting, then you have taken it off too soon. Put it back on and give yourself a few more weeks.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding has many wonderful benefits, and one of them is helping mothers recover during the postpartum period. As your baby nurses, your body releases oxytocin, the love hormone. Not only does this elevate your mood, but this hormone also causes your uterus to contract, aiding in the involution process. This powerful hormone helped you to make a baby, and birth a baby, and now it helps you to recover from childbirth.

Breastfeeding also helps you to get more rest. That’s right! The contents of your breast milk change throughout the day. In the evening hours your milk contains higher levels of tryptophan, an amino acid that converts to serotonin which makes baby feel happy, which then converts to melatonin—the hormone that induces sleep. Melatonin levels in breast milk also continue to rise through the night, so by breastfeeding during the night, you will help baby to fall back to sleep faster, which helps everyone get more rest. Your prolactin levels are also highest when you are sleeping and this hormone will promote a hearty breast milk supply. Thus you need sleep for breastfeeding and you need breastfeeding for sleep! It’s nature’s perfect symbiosis.

Another aspect of postpartum recovery is the emotional component. It is important to feel successful at being a new parent. Many women start off breastfeeding, but too many give up because of various difficulties and lack of support. One of the best ways to set yourself up for success is to work with a lactation consultant (IBCLC or LC) right from the start and to have one reassess your breastfeeding if a problem arises (whether real or perceived). Many women are worried that they have a low breast milk supply. It is the most common concern. If you are practicing all of the above techniques for recovery, and still feel that you have a low supply, then an IBCLC can assess your breastfeeding and give you techniques to set you up for success. Many think that breastfeeding will be a no-brainer, and are surprised when complications arise. It’s good to be aware that this is common and that there is a lot of support available. Never be afraid to ask for help.

Love Yourself
You are a mother now and your body may not look the same, and that’s OK. There is no need to be in a hurry to fit back into those skinny jeans. You do not need to hide the evidence that you’ve just had a baby. Be patient and gentle with your body in your fourth trimester. Learn to look in the mirror and laugh and love the body that made your baby. No matter how you have given birth, you are a brave warrior.

This article appeared in *Pathways to Family Wellness* magazine, Issue #45.