

After Baby Comes

Rachel Taylor, RN



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*To my mom.
You managed each day so well.
I am who I am because of your sacrifices.
Thank you.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Forgotten Trimester

You are already a good mom.

Chances are you have been preparing for the arrival of your baby for months. You have read countless books, blogs, and social media posts on pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, parenting, and more. You have probably done tons of research and read many reviews on the best baby products from highchairs to swaddles to car seats. And more than likely you have had some childbirth education, whether through a class at your local hospital or a baby book you ordered.

As a postpartum registered nurse, these are all the things I would want you to do before your baby comes. But one way I can help you prepare better for this pregnancy journey and after-baby experience is by providing you with a thorough resource for your fourth trimester. Many call this trimester *the forgotten trimester*, and unfortunately, at times, this has been the case. Studies show us that, during this trimester, postpartum moms feel their health concerns are not addressed,¹ that they are not being educated on what they need,² and they desire advice from healthcare professionals, not friends and family alone.³ A healthcare team—OBGYNs, nurses, childbirth educators, and others—does a great job helping new mothers prepare

for pregnancy, labor, delivery, and newborn care, but we have neglected the major transition that happens in the new mother's body, soul, and spirit during the many months following childbirth.

Just as being in labor and giving birth each have an emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual aspect, I believe the postpartum period does as well. The term *postpartum* has become synonymous with postpartum depression, and yet the postpartum season is much more multifaceted. This limited mindset surrounding postpartum is unfortunate, because new moms need a holistic approach to all aspects of this time, not only the effects on a mother's mental health. Postpartum recovery needs to be more than an afterthought.

When I listened to one pediatrician educate a class of soon-to-be new parents, he said, "We have LDRP rooms which mean 'Labor, Delivery, Recovery'...and I forget what the other one is." Postpartum. I chuckled under my breath and thought, *How fitting. Isn't this the way it has been?* Of course, he is a wonderful pediatrician and a champion of new mothers. He simply had a long day in the office, and the word had just slipped his mind. But the lesson I took away was powerful.

We spend so much time preparing for pregnancy, labor, and birth, but postpartum education is at the most a 30-minute spiel. Most of us do not realize we should have been better prepared until we are already struggling in the days and weeks following the birth of our babies. Before I had my first baby, I felt I was well prepared for my postpartum journey and found myself shocked by the exhaustion, emotions, soreness, and recovery time I needed during those first few months after birth. It left me wondering, *How could I be a postpartum nurse and be so unprepared? What about other new mothers who did not have any experience with it?*

When that sweet, wonderful baby finally arrives, families shower the snuggly newborn with all their attention, while neglecting the mothers who brought those babies into the world. I am so sorry you are often overlooked because you, Mama, are important. What you are going through is important, and what you will continue to go through matters.

The Fourth Trimester

The fourth trimester is the term that refers to the first 12 weeks following childbirth. This idea was popularized more than 20 years ago by pediatrician Dr. Harvey Karp, who believes a baby's environment should be much like it was inside the mother's womb for the first three months following birth.⁴ During this time, you and your baby are separate but still one. It is a time of great change, transition, and process not only in your baby, but also in you! And I'm here to help you through this season because as a nurse and a mom, I am confident that a healthy mother equals healthier motherhood.

Here you will find a judgment-free zone and a safe place to heal, recover, and process all that is happening in your newfound motherhood. Also, I will always promote a culture of honor here. I choose to honor hospitals, birth centers, obstetrics, midwifery, and doulas. Each brings unique assets to the table, and I believe there is room for all. When we can honor each other, we will be able to work as a team and benefit new mothers.

We are going to learn to ditch perfectionism and comparison and embrace our own process and motherhood journey. In these pages, you will find evidence-based, practical advice for your recovery that is proven and effective, and you will be guided in what to expect throughout these first three months. You'll also learn when it is time to reach out for help. I have pulled in several experts on pelvic floor physical therapy, body work, lactation, and even relationships to help in every area of our lives in the fourth trimester. Drawing from my professional experience, I have also developed and placed Nurse's Tips for you throughout the book to offer you important help and reminders along the way.

Though some do not acknowledge the difficulties of the fourth trimester, others describe it as revolutionary. It is a time of detailed, focused, internal process and work, much like a metamorphosis. We are changing on the inside even more than on the outside. As the caterpillar changes into a butterfly, it goes through an intense, dark process. Parts of itself fade as other parts that have been inside emerge. These then develop into many more

new and beautiful parts until one day it breaks from the cocoon and soars into the sky.⁵ I can't imagine the process is all pleasant, but the results are beautiful. This is motherhood—a glorious transition of who you once were into a new, more beautiful version of you.

Mama, you are about to embark on the most life-changing thing you will ever do. Becoming a mother is hard and wonderful all at the same time. You will love more than you ever thought possible, and you will wonder how you ever did life without this child. You may feel incredibly anxious and scared. And at other times, you may feel like you are a complete failure. If I were sitting right beside you, I would reach over, place my hand on yours, and say, “Every single thing you will feel is okay. In fact, it is good because it means you are a new mom experiencing all the emotions and feelings that moms do.”

Allow yourself to experience it all—the triumphs, failures, challenges, and glory that motherhood contains. I am here to be a guidepost for you and share with you what this passage into your fourth trimester holds for your physical, emotional, and spiritual healing and recovery. I bring over a decade of experience working with thousands of brand-new mothers, just like you, and I hope to make this journey a bit easier for you. Please know you are surrounded by so many others who have gone through what you have, and you are not alone.

As a postpartum nurse for more than 15 years, I can finally say, now you can take your nurse home with you. So, let's get started. I am so glad you are here!



PART 1

Frame

CHAPTER 1

Perspectives and Expectations: Postpartum in Different Cultures

Birth is universal, but the *recovery* from birth is highly cultural. I learned this early in my nursing career when I cared for an Asian patient who chose only to eat warm foods following the birth of her baby. Her husband explained to me that this was common in their culture. Postpartum mothers would solely eat warm foods, drink warm drinks, and take warm baths.¹ She bundled up in warm clothes and kept hot packs close by. This was comforting to the mother and is believed to help with *chi*, a positive energy moving through the body that promotes healing and comfort. For 40 days, the mother's support system took care of everything for her. Her jobs were to rest, nurse, and bond with her baby.

Working hard to be culturally aware, one of my fellow nurses, Katie, went into one of her patients' rooms to introduce herself. Her patient, who had a Hispanic background, was standing beside her bed. Katie, eager to learn, excitedly exclaimed, "Is this a cultural thing?" The patient giggled and said, "No, my bottom hurts when I lay down." Katie and her patient laughed and laughed over the conversation. These two stories remind us

that there are universal postpartum experiences, such as discomfort in the bottom, and then there are others that depend on your location around the globe.

If I were to travel to Australia as a postpartum nurse caring for patients, I might hear the common phrase “wetting the baby’s head.” My American nursing perspective would cause me to assume the parents were discussing washing their baby’s hair. Instead, it means having a drink to honor the newest member of the family. This is a common tradition in Europe as well. Australians also commonly stock the freezer full of meals for the parents of a brand-new baby. (A big-time yes to this tradition please!)

In Belgium and France, pelvic floor health is a big focus, and insurance covers around 20 visits to be used before birth and in postpartum with the option of receiving more if needed. The most common postnatal care is focused around pelvic floor recovery for the mother.² These cultures understand the importance of pelvic floor health and how this area can affect a woman—either positively or negatively—for the rest of her life.

In Nepal, women recover in their in-laws’ homes for at least ten days. During this time, new mothers may not eat salt or green vegetables, bathe, or go out in the sun. Birth is considered unclean, and a mom must undergo certain rituals and allow a certain number of days to pass to be considered clean again. After ten days, the birth mother may go to her own parents’ home. A mustard oil massage is then given to both mom and baby to relax the muscles and smooth the joints.³

Many cultures, such as in Colombia and other Latin American countries, observe a 40-day practice. This is a time when care is focused on supporting the mother and allowing her to rest and bond with her baby. The support system cooks meals, cares for other children, and takes care of household chores.

In the United States, a typical postpartum recovery looks like staying two days in the hospital (three to four if the mother had a cesarean section) and a follow-up visit at six weeks postpartum. Friends and family may

bring meals to help the new parents, and visitors come to meet the new baby. Postpartum care tends to be focused on the baby, but more professionals are beginning to recognize the need for better new-mother support.

Postnatal retreats are on the rise in certain parts of the world.⁴ Mothers can be fully pampered with massages and professional baby help while they rest. This sounds like a dream for most of us! Unfortunately, it will more than likely remain a dream because of the high cost. Even those who can afford it might prefer at-home, sustainable support as opposed to a one-night respite.

Many cultures practice rituals for the placenta, and there are several different disposal methods including discarding it as medical waste, burying it, incineration, placing it in a specific area (like underneath a tree), or eating it. In ancient Egypt, the placenta was believed to be the baby's guardian angel.⁵

Today, the placenta is treated differently around the world. In Chinese and Japanese culture, it is common to bury the placenta. In Bali, it is normal practice to place the placenta in a coconut and hang it from a tree in the village graveyard. This is believed to protect the baby from sickness and misfortune.⁶ In Ukraine, a midwife buries the placenta anywhere except where it may be stepped on. It is believed that if someone were to step on it, it would make the mother infertile.⁷

Is there a right way to recover from birth? Perspective and expectations play a huge role in our postpartum recovery. If we have a baby in Latin America, we may have a less anxious postpartum experience because we know we will have support from women who have been through what we have been through. We might expect help with meals, housework, and other children because this is normal in our culture. It would be common to anticipate several weeks of rest.

If we give birth in the United States, we may be under the impression that postpartum is a breezy experience. With a two-day recovery period and a single six-week follow-up visit where most of us get the "all-clear to

go back to pre-pregnant life,” we may get the false impression that that is all there is to it. I know I did, and I was a postpartum nurse!

It is not a secret that postpartum can be tough. Mom influencers all over the world discuss the challenges of this season. And even celebrities who have plenty of financial resources to hire help speak out about its difficulties.

Even though in recent years, much attention has been given to how hard postpartum is, I think it is just as important to look at *why* it can be such a challenge and *how* to improve our experience in the fourth trimester. This takes a multifaceted approach.

We are complex, multidimensional creations made up of three parts: spirit, soul, and body. I believe it is nearly impossible to affect one part of us without affecting the other. I think this is one reason we cannot take a “do this and this, and you will be great” approach. Anything that affects our bodies the way birth and having a newborn does is sure to affect our emotions, our mental health, our relationships, and our faith.

But I have wonderful news! Postpartum is not a ship on fire where those who survive emerge from the ashes traumatized and smelling of smoke. It is a journey of authenticity that gives us the opportunity to transform into the most whole version of ourselves that we have ever been. We are not meant to go back to our pre-pregnancy state. We are meant to experience a metamorphosis into more of who we are as women and as mothers.

In the following chapters, you will find a roadmap for embracing the metamorphosis taking place in the postpartum season, overcoming the challenges, and healing more effectively in every area of your life. From breastfeeding to pelvic floor health, to emotional and mental wellness, all the way to connection and communication issues that can come up in marriage, you will find a wholeness guide to help you have the best fourth trimester you can have.

Feel free to skip around to the topics you need when you need them. I wrote this book for that very reason. Let’s be honest: It is so easy to grab the phone and google questions at two o’clock in the morning and

suddenly find we are down a deep rabbit hole of information that produces more anxiety. I do not want that for you!

I hope to bring a better understanding of all that a new mother experiences after birth, so you find the grace you need to engage the process, heal better, and enjoy the journey. Let's venture into this postpartum season of life together. Welcome to your newfound motherhood.

CHAPTER 2

Prepping for Postpartum (It Isn't Too Late)

Two days before my due date, I waddled into the La-Z-Boy store to purchase a rocking chair. Up and down and up and down we went as we tried out all the options. One of the sales associates looked at my husband and me and said, “The most important question is who will be doing most of the rocking?” We stared at each other blankly for a few moments, until I spoke up and said, “Probably me.”

It never occurred to us that we needed to discuss what our roles and expectations would be for when our baby arrived. We had done the things we were told: We went to prenatal appointments, made a registry, had the showers, put together the baby's room. Weren't we ready?

If you have not birthed your baby yet, a month before your due date is still a great time to start preparing. Have open and honest conversations with your spouse and ask each other questions about roles and expectations now. The more you understand each other's expectations, the more you can meet those and navigate conflicts that creep up once your baby comes. Even if you have birthed your baby already, I'll share some great conversation starters that will help determine ownership, roles, and expectations.

You may even want to go as far as making an Our Growing Family mission statement. This should be simple, just a sentence or two, and include the most important things to you both. Mine looks something like this: “Love well. Choose connection over fear.” The conversations and choices you make should always reflect your mission statement. This practice comes from Steven Covey and totally changed how we operate in my family.¹ If you need help creating a mission statement, there are great resources online.²

In the medical community, we have a phrase we say when emotions are high, situations are chaotic, and we need to refocus on what matters in the moment. It reminds us that we are working as a team. We all know if someone states, “Do you hear that helicopter?” we need to refocus. And it works! No need for yelling or gesturing. Every person responds without alarming the patient. It also builds trust between everyone in the room, including the patient.

If a doctor yells at a nurse or a nurse curses at another nurse, this degrades trust because it looks like we do not value each other. It is completely uncomfortable to witness a conflict that includes disrespect. The same is true in other relationships. If we are struggling in the postpartum period and we are yelling at each other, waving our arms, pointing the finger, using passive-aggressive language, or even giving the silent treatment and stonewalling, we are not heading toward success.

Because of this, I recommend you and your significant other negotiate a phrase you can both use when tensions are high or you simply don’t know how to ask for what you need, but you know you need something.

My husband and I use “finger guns” at each other when we need to talk privately. Not only is this quick, but it also adds an aspect of humor that alleviates the situation when we see the other finger gunning. There is always a *pew-pew-pew* noise that goes along with it.

A phrase or signal can really be anything as long as it is meaningful to you both and you will recognize it as a cue to stop and listen. Make an agreement between you that if this phrase is spoken, you give the other

your immediate attention. Watching TV, gaming, or scrolling on your phone needs to pause right away, because the other person is your priority in this moment.

When I caught up with one of Birmingham, Alabama's most sought-after doulas, Jeanna McNeil, I asked her, "What is the one place you see most new parents struggle with in postpartum?" She responded, "I feel that when it comes to postpartum, many families enter into it vastly under-prepared. I think that there's often such an emphasis on preparing for the birth that postpartum preparations sort of fall by the wayside. And while acquiring education and resources for birth is absolutely imperative, it is equally important for the postpartum season as well."³ I completely agree. The amount of rest needed, healing, recovery, emotions, hormone changes, and changes to the relationship dynamic is a surprise for many.

NURSE'S TIP

Stock up on hand sanitizer and antibacterial soap.
You will use these often as you care for your baby.

Roles and Responsibilities

As promised, here are some conversation starters for couples to help them determine who does what in the coming days.

Who Is Feeding the Baby at Night?

If mom is exclusively breastfeeding, will dad commit to be on diaper-changing duty or putting-baby-back-to-sleep duty? If mom is pumping or formula feeding, do we agree to take turns warming bottles and feeding at night? Or maybe we switch out nights, so we each get longer turns of uninterrupted sleep.

Who Changes Diapers?

Let's be honest, it is probably both of us. But it is an important conversation to have. I have taken care of one parent or the other who was so disgusted by diaper changes that they were unable to do it without getting sick. If this is the case in your home, what is the plan?

Who Runs to the Store for Essentials When We Are Suddenly Out?

It is bound to happen. We realize that we are down to one diaper or that we just used the very last baby wipe. Does dad want to run down the road or does mom want to get out for a bit to get some fresh air?

Who Is Doing What Chores?

Chore assignments may need to be reevaluated in the first several weeks after delivery. Depending on how birth went, a mom may be unable to do much more than walk around for over a month. This is not laziness! It is the sign of a body that is in need of longer recovery. If this is the case, who is doing laundry? Who is getting dinner on the table? Who is starting the dishwasher? How are we keeping the household running smoothly?

Hopefully these questions spurred you to think of some others that would relate to your own situation. The more we communicate our expectations and roles, the less conflict we will find ourselves in when the situation comes up.

Even once a plan is agreed upon, choose to be flexible. If you know he had a horribly long day at work and a huge presentation coming up the following day, offer to take some extra duties for him. He should do the same for you. Or even ask a family member or dear friend to pitch in for the night.

Truthfully, marriage is so much more than 50/50. It is days of picking up the slack when your spouse simply can't. It is giving more than you receive on some days, and then receiving more than you give on others.

Who Is on Your Team?

The priority in the immediate postpartum period is physical recovery, learning to nurse, bonding with your baby, and resting. You will need support during this time, but it is important to consider who will fit the bill.

NURSE'S TIP

A rolling cart is a convenient and helpful way to keep supplies in reach and is easily transferrable between rooms. Stock with snacks, water, hair ties, breastfeeding supplies, and baby products. For specific product recommendations, visit [Amazon.com/Shop/MamaDidItOfficial](https://www.amazon.com/Shop/MamaDidItOfficial)

Recovery from birth is an intimate time. I am consistently in awe that I have been privileged to be a part of so many recoveries (a big thank-you to each mama who trusted me with their care!). The first couple of weeks after birth continue to be an intimate time and should be valued as such. Your body is healing, your breasts are leaking, your schedule is turned on its head, and you are caring for a newborn. Bottom line, you are now a new mother.

Dividing your support system into three groups can be helpful. You have probably already had conversations about how to handle *that* person or what to do about visitors. Think on who you could place in these groups and gracefully communicate with them ahead of time.

Group 1: The Team

Think of these as the “maids of honor” of the birth world. They are available for the first three weeks after you give birth. They understand you need lots of time with your baby. They are not there only to hold the baby

(it is a bonus if they get to). Your job is to care for your baby, and their job is to care for you. They will do housework, laundry, make you padsicles, bring you lactation cookies, set up sitz baths, feed your pet, play with other children, or arrange dinner for you. This could be a mom, a sister, a mother-in-law, a best friend, or a postpartum doula. Communicate to this group ahead of time and ask, “Would you be able to help me recover by taking care of things so I can rest and bond with my baby?” Asking if they will do a specific task (or two or three) will help them know exactly how to meet that need.

Group 2: The Weekenders

Present three weeks after birth, these are the “bridesmaids” of postpartum. These are those who may not be as helpful but are loved ones. They still should not be people you feel the need to entertain—this is out of the question. You are still recovering! They get to meet the baby, hold the baby, and bring a meal if they offer. Take advantage of these visits by asking them ahead of time if they mind holding the baby while you shower or take a nap. Most of them will be thrilled to say yes! Communicate to this group and let them know: “We will need about three weeks to rest and recover but then look forward to visits.”

Group 3: The Community

From six weeks on, these people are similar to “wedding guests.” You mingle and have conversations with them when the time is right, either in your home or out and about. These are your mommy friends or your community groups. Meetings with these people help you find your voice again. You will be able to share struggles and encourage one another in your new roles. You will not worry so much if your baby cries or needs to nurse because these people are in the same season of life as you. A new mom’s small group from church, a neighborhood group, a mommy-and-me exercise class, or a lactation support group can fit this need if you feel lonely in this season. It is also a great way to be a friend and build new friendships.

It is a lot of work to get you and your new baby ready and out of the house, but it is worth it. You will feel better emotionally and more like yourself after your outing.

It does not matter how much you love someone. If they are degrading you as a mother, criticizing what you do, or puffing themselves up by putting you down, they do not need to be part of your support group. You can find more on these situations in chapter 19.

QUESTION:

What size clothes will I need postpartum?

ANSWER: Though your uterus is back to normal size by six weeks postpartum, your body will continue to change for several months. In the fourth trimester it is important to have on hand three to four outfits that fit well and you feel confident in. These outfits can be as simple as leggings, a nursing tank, and a long flannel shirt or a maxi dress. Don't try to cram yourself in pre-pregnancy clothes too soon. It isn't worth it!

For Those Who Offer to Help

Have one of your baby shower hostesses or even someone who offers to be helpful arrange a meal train for you once your baby is born. There are websites devoted to making this easier!⁴ Having meals show up at your door is such a blessing in the early days after birth. The person organizing the meal train can also set boundaries for you ahead of time, if you wish, by adding notes or an email that says something like, "Please be aware that mom and baby are recovering and need rest. Plan to keep visits to ten

minutes. They will be ready for longer visits in three weeks.” Most people will have no trouble understanding!

If meal train dinners book up quickly, ask for a few days’ worth of bento box lunches. Items like chicken salad, fresh fruits, nuts, cheeses, wraps, and salads with dressing on the side are a great way to care for a new mother. How easy is it when those hunger pangs hit to simply walk to the fridge and grab a box? Also, be sure to inform the helper of allergies or dietary preferences.

A protein basket is another favorite among new mamas. A basket full of things like healthy protein bars, grass-fed beef sticks, crackers, trail mix, and nuts is a great gift for a new mom. Add a treat or two for fun. Breast-feeding mothers need an extra 500 calories every day, and this is an easy way for her to remember to get those calories in.



Why prep so much before birth? We tend to greatly underestimate our needs in the fourth trimester. Of course, things you didn’t prepare for will come up along the way, but doing what you can ahead of time will calm anxieties, ease tension, and help you navigate the waters of postpartum a bit easier.