

“Babies are our precious jewels, our prayer that tomorrow will be worth living.”

Natural Pregnancy & Mothering

By Sue Mauer Morningstar, CNM, WHCNP

Women’s lives have traditionally been divided into three stages: maiden, mother and crone. This second article in a three part series focuses on the mother, the phase of a woman’s life in which she becomes a vessel bearing our children, the sacred seeds of tomorrow.

Pregnancy, childbirth and lactation are natural physiologic processes that we share in common with all mammals. Women’s bodies are designed to conceive, carry, birth and nourish children. If you’ve ever watched a goat or other domestic animal giving birth to and cleaning off her young, you already know that mothering is an instinctive ability.

Even so, a woman’s transition into motherhood is a profound rite of passage that has tremendous influence over the rest of her life as well as the lives of her children. The choices a woman makes in pregnancy and childbirth can empower and strengthen her, especially when she takes responsibility for this awesome process. Or, she may be diminished and even victimized if she becomes overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience. Depending on her birth experience, a mother’s bond with her baby may get off to a strong and clear start, or may be more tenuous and difficult to establish.

Ideally, a baby is conceived when the loving energy of two individuals sparks new life. The genetic material in the DNA of sperm and egg unite and set off a chain reaction in which an entirely new and unique person is created. While the ultimate outcome is a mystery, much is dependent on our physical and emotional preparation beforehand.

The best way to prepare yourself for pregnancy and childbirth is to keep nourishing your body and spirit so you can be as strong and healthy as possible. It’s a good idea to eat plenty of fresh organic fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lots of high quality protein foods. The simple benefits of regular exercise, fresh air and sunshine as well as a supportive and loving environment for the mother are beyond measure.

When pregnant, it’s important to drink at least two quarts of fluids a day, including water, juices and herbal infusions. Red raspberry leaf (*Rubus idaeus*) is a wonderful tonic that strengthens the uterus and prepares it for the work of labor and childbirth. It makes a delicious tea that is often combined with lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) and mint (*Mentha spp.*), which aid digestion, or dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*), nettles (*Urtica dioica*) and yellow dock (*Rumex crispus*), all of which are high in iron and other minerals vital for both mother and baby. These mild yet effective

herbs are gifts of mother nature that have been safely used by pregnant women for countless centuries.

Your baby's major organs are all formed during the first three months of pregnancy. Throughout your pregnancy, but especially during this first trimester, it's crucial to avoid exposure to modern civilization's wide variety of teratogenic (birth-defect causing) hazards, which might interfere with or damage your baby's normal development. These include toxic chemicals, environmental pollutants and x-rays. It's also best for pregnant women to avoid alcohol, cigarettes and second hand smoke, street drugs, certain herbs and most prescription and over the counter medications. Avoid food additives, preservatives, paint fumes and hot tubs. As a rule of thumb, unless you know it's safe, keep your baby away from it, especially during your first trimester.

Visualize your baby growing and thriving inside of you, nourished by your loving energy and strength. It's equally important for the mother to be surrounded by loving energy. Connect with other expectant mothers, family and friends for support. Take time out to relax and fully experience this most awesome time of your life.

Babies in the uterus are responsive to their mother's voice, so talk and sing to your baby. Inspiring and informative books to read while pregnant include *Spiritual Midwifery* by Ina May Gaskin, *Birth*, by Catherine Milinaire, and *Motherprayer*, by Tikva Frymer-Kensky.

When it's time to choose your birth attendant, look for someone who sees you as a unique individual with your own particular hopes, fears and dreams. Choose someone who is experienced and knowledgeable, able to recognize and guide you through any difficulties that might arise. Your birth attendant should help you feel comfortable, safe and an empowered, active participant in your birth. She should welcome family participation at all stages of the pregnancy.

As your pregnancy progress, it's wise to make a birth plan detailing your preferences for labor, delivery, and for after your baby is born. Choose to birth in a place that feels safe and comfortable to you. You many wish to invite those you love and can trust to support you. But remember that the only thing we can be sure of in childbirth is that *we can't be sure of anything*. So be prepared to throw away your birth plan if necessary and surrender to whatever the universe intends. There is no right and wrong in childbirth other than the ultimate safety of the baby and mother.

Surround yourself with your own personal comfort objects, fresh flowers and your favorite music. Strive for what Claudia Panuthos in her book *Transformation Through Birth* calls "positive birthing." This involves giving birth actively, experiencing fully the sensations and emotions of delivering a new life through your body.

While in labor, it's generally best to stay as active as you can for as long as possible, unless your membranes have ruptured. Understand that while you cannot control the energy of birth, you can influence your experience and responses to it. Learn to ride the contractions like ocean waves, letting yourself be carried along with the flow. Feel your connection to all the mothers

who have birthed before you and to the primal energy force that sustains the universe. In childbirth, you are that divine and creative force.

After your baby is born, let him lie on your breast and listen to your heartbeat, a familiar and constantly comforting sound from the womb. In many traditional cultures, this is a time of seclusion and one on one bonding for mother and baby. Let your baby gradually and gently adjust to the outside world. During this quiet time, the mother can rest and heal from the birth itself, while beginning to integrate her new role in life.

During the postpartum period, time takes on a new meaning for parents. New parents need to sleep when they can, so learn to nap when the baby naps and don't count the hours of sleep you are or aren't getting. Focus on taking care of yourself and the new life you just created. Don't be afraid to ask for and accept help from others, but also be sure to set boundaries. For example, when you are resting, turn off your phone and put a "Do not disturb" sign over your doorbell.

Expect to be overwhelmed on all levels after the birth. There are so many new challenges to cope with while your body recovers from the intense physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth. Your hormones are shifting rapidly, while your body is leaking fluids, sleep deprived and healing internally and externally. Emotionally, you're adjusting to being a mother and to the lifelong responsibility for another person's wellbeing.

Because of these stresses, the euphoria surrounding birth can sometimes turn into the postpartum blues. While this is a common transient occurrence, it's helpful to join a new mom's group and share your feelings with other new mothers. As women we so often are experts at nurturing others, while neglecting our own emotional needs. Exercise and fresh air can help lift the spirits, while St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) can also help with mild postpartum depression. However, if you experience persistent or severe symptoms, other measures may be necessary, as directed by your health care provider.

You may hear lots of conflicting advice from many corners. After all, the diverse wisdom of billions of mothers is available to you. But remember that as the mother, you are the expert on your own baby. Gather information from trusted sources, but ultimately follow your natural instincts.

It's clear that breastfeeding is best for almost all newborns. It's important for breastfeeding mothers to continue their healthy pregnancy eating habits and to continue avoiding environmental hazards. Herbal infusions especially useful for breastfeeding include oatstraw (*Avena sativa*), hops (*Humulus lupulus*), motherwort (*Leonorus cardiaca*) and borage (*Borago officinalis*), all of which increase milk production. Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*) and lavender (*Lavendula officinalis*) are especially nourishing to the nervous system and have a general calming effect. This can help release breast milk through the "let-down" reflex. Nettles (*Urtica dioeca*) are an excellent overall energy building tonic, while red raspberry leaf is ideal for helping the uterus return to its non-pregnant resting state.

A newborn infant doesn't really distinguish herself as separate from her mother for several

months. That's why it's so important to have lots of skin-to-skin contact with your baby. In many indigenous cultures babies are constantly held and bundled. You can never hold, cuddle, or kiss your baby too much. Babies are extremely sensitive to your emotions, so try to relax and stay calm and centered around your baby.

When choosing linens and clothing, look for organic cotton fiber, and use a mild natural laundry soap to help minimize skin irritation. Try using cotton diapers, which are easy to use and friendlier to your baby's bottom than disposables. Since plastic diapers make up 25% of our landfill and take hundreds of years to disintegrate, it's also better for Mother Earth.

Babies are our precious jewels, our prayer that tomorrow will be worth living. One moment they are cradled in our arms, yet before long they are walking and talking, and then asking for the car keys. A moment later, it seems, they are having their own children, as the cycle of life continues. Enjoy this magical time that passes much too quickly!

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions please consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Sue Morningstar CNM, women's health nurse practitioner, is a graduate of Columbia University School of Nursing and Yale University School of Nurse-Midwifery. Sue shares a family medicine practice with her husband, Howard Morningstar MD, herbalist and board certified family physician in Ashland, Oregon. They can be reached at (541) 482-2032.