

# Postpartum & Fourth Trimester Overview



“The fourth trimester” refers to the twelve-week period after the birth of the baby and includes great emotional and physical changes as the baby adapts to life outside of the womb and the birthing person (and partner/s) adapts to their new role as a parent.

Recovery and healing after birth can range from weeks to months, or longer, depending on the events of the birth, the physical and emotional needs of the birthing person, and other specifics of the individual situation. In addition to healing from the birth itself, the postpartum period also brings hormonal changes, physical changes, stress, and sleep deprivation, so it is important to be aware of ways to support the birthing person.

## **Some events of a normal postpartum recovery experience include:**

- Uterine involution- the physiological process of the uterus transforming from the pregnant to the pre-pregnant state.
- Lochia- bleeding that may last six weeks or longer.
- After pains.
- Stretch marks.
- Abdominal weakness.
- Organs shifting back to their pre-pregnant state.
- Fluid volumes receding.
- Adjustments to soft and hard tissue.
- Hormonal changes and

- fluctuations.
- Vaginal/pelvic soreness.
- Healing from sutures.

### **Warning Signs**

While there is a wide range of normal in the postpartum period, it is important to be aware that there are potential serious health problems, some life-threatening. Many such complications can be successfully treated if they're identified early.

#### **Postpartum warning signs that require seeking emergency help include:**

- Chest pain.
- Obstructed breathing or shortness of breath.
- Seizures.
- Thoughts of hurting self or the baby.

#### **Postpartum warning signs that require calling a health care provider include:**

- Bleeding and soaking through more than one pad an hour, or blood clots the size of an egg or bigger.
- An incision that isn't healing.
- A red or swollen leg that's painful or warm to the touch.
- A temperature of 100.4 F (38 C) or higher.
- A headache that doesn't get better, even after taking medication, or a bad headache with vision changes.

### **Soothing Baby**

Obviously, a big part of the postpartum period is caring for the new baby. Often, a big issue in the early baby days is soothing: how do I get my baby to stop crying? Some experts say that human babies need the first three months of life for their brains and central nervous systems to mature. During this time, babies often like things that recreate the experience of being in-utero, such as dim lights, being swaddled tightly, white noise or shushing sounds, swaying or swinging movements, side or stomach positions, and sucking. A doula may support families in postpartum by offering suggestions for ways to soothe and comfort their baby, as well as resources for feeding, sleep, and normal infant development and stages,

so that parents can better understand the needs and abilities of their newborn.

### **Life Changes**

Although the “fourth trimester” is generally defined as the first twelve weeks after the baby's birth, parents often *feel* postpartum for much longer. Indeed, it's relatively normal for birthing people to feel mostly defined by having recently had a baby for up to two or three years. Part of the doula's role is to normalize and validate the range of experiences and feelings that parents may have in relation to their new roles and tasks as parents, and their lives after baby.

You might consider working with the labyrinth exercise in one of your postpartum visits, to remind them that they are still finding their way back out again, one step, one breath at a time.