

# NATURAL MOTHERHOOD

## Creating the Best Start for New Life

by Deborah Shouse

“A woman’s body is exquisitely designed to conceive, nurture and give birth,” says Dr. Carol J. Phillips, an Annapolis, Maryland, prenatal chiropractor, doula and author of *Hands of Love: Seven Steps to the Miracle of Birth*.

Judith Lothian, Ph.D., associate editor of the *Journal of Perinatal Education*, professor of nursing at Seton Hall University, in South Orange, New Jersey, and a natural childbirth educator, knows the significance of women’s deep intuitive instinct. “Women who feel supported and encouraged can tap into their own wisdom and find deep satisfaction in giving birth naturally. The process itself perfectly prepares mother and baby to continue on their journey together.”

Several gentle strategies help mothers-to-be prepare for the joys of natural pregnancy and childbirth.

### Build a Baby-Friendly Body

#### Discover Intuitive Nutrition

“Follow your urges,” counsels Peggy O’Mara, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, former editor of *Mothering Magazine* and author of *Having a Baby, Naturally*. “Eat when you’re hungry. Sleep when you’re weary. Go to the bathroom the moment nature calls. Practice this in pregnancy so you’ll be in the habit of listening to your instincts when you give birth.” This simple advice counters women’s common habit of attending to other people’s needs instead of their own.

Along with eating organic whole foods, Kristy Wilson, of Las Vegas, a certified professional midwife, labor doula and placenta preparation specialist, recommends both a plant-based food supplement with iron and whole food prenatal supplement. Vitamin C is important for a strong amniotic sac; she suggests at least 500 milligrams daily. A high-strung mom can take magnesium chloride baths or sip a soothing cup of red raspberry leaf tea.

“Women that are concerned about their diet can tune into the baby and ask what they need,” says Lori Bregman,

of Santa Monica, California, a doula, birth coach and author of *The Mindful Mom-to-Be*. If craving a certain dish, she can research its benefits and healing qualities. The yearning for comfort foods like pizza, macaroni or ice cream may signal the need for more nurturing. Eyeing popcorn or chips could be a sign she’s stuffing down an emotion. She can ask herself, “What am I suppressing?”

“Eat a lot of protein, including vitamin B-rich foods, during both pregnancy and breastfeeding,” advises O’Mara.

“Nursing moms need to eat nutrient-dense foods frequently,



along with getting adequate fluids," says Wilson. She recommends foods that assist lactation called galactagogues, like almonds, avocados, legumes, kale and spinach. To increase milk production, add fennel to meals or smoothies, or turn to capsules.

## Keep Moving with Intention

Wilson recommends yoga, swimming, walking or light jogging three to five times a week, for 20 minutes a day. "Squatting like a child on your haunches is a great exercise for childbirth," she says, noting that 20 squats daily will strengthen core muscles. Sitting on an exercise ball instead of a desk chair or couch also engages core muscles, while improving posture.

"Regular exercise brings more energy, better sleep, reduced stress, higher spirits, better odds of an easy labor, faster post-delivery recovery and reduced risk of gestational diabetes and high blood pressure during pregnancy," Bregman finds. She recommends a prenatal yoga practice that includes breathing and visualizations. This restorative form of yoga offers gentle stretching, promotes good circulation and naturally supports relief or healing of many possible pregnancy ailments.

"To alleviate physical distress, try chiropractic prenatal care," says Phillips.

Light finger contact from an experienced practitioner helps realign bony segments and restores the body's normal tone. "A prenatal expert can adjust so the mom's body maintains its balance and the baby is free to move."

Craniosacral therapy reestablishes balance to the membranes that encapsulate the brain and spinal cord.

## Prepare the Mind

"Just say, 'No thanks,' to friends who want to burden you with stories of their long, excruciating labors," O'Mara advises. "Protect yourself from toxic people and their horror stories. Focus on maintaining your own good health and surround yourself with people that have experienced a normal birth. Plan to have uplifting support during the birthing process and in the postpartum period."

A woman easily influenced by others might ask her doula, midwife or spouse to be her advocate. A woman that needs to exercise control might seek such assistance for peace of mind, knowing that her wishes will be followed.

"Pain' is a fear-based word," to be avoided in conversations about labor, Wilson explains. "Don't fear the strength of contractions. They are doing exactly what your body



**THE CONNECTIONS ESTABLISHED BETWEEN MOTHER AND CHILD ARE MUCH STRONGER WHEN SHE PROGRESSES THROUGH PREGNANCY AND BIRTH FROM A NATURAL PERSPECTIVE.**

— KRISTY WILSON

needs to do to give birth." As a midwife, she helps moms relax and embrace these intensely important sensations by focusing on what is going on in their body. Research published in the journal *Cell Adhesion & Migration* shows that the hormones released during labor enter into the baby's immune system to also strengthen the child.

## Spark the Spirit

Affirmations can positively state the mother-to-be's intentions for pregnancy and birth. Examples include: "Birth is a safe and wonderful experience. I am choosing the right path for my birth. I trust my body and my instincts. I have all the support I need." Wilson recommends choosing two to four that resonate, repeating them every morning while gazing into the mirror, placing them on the refrigerator door and even having them pop up on a smartphone.

"Meditation prepares you for childbirth and can also be soothing during labor by offering tools that push away fear," says O'Mara. She likes this mantra from Thich Nhat Hahn's book, *Being Peace*: "Breath-

ing in, I calm myself, breathing out, I smile."

To begin, sit comfortably in a quiet room with eyes closed. For women new to meditation, Wilson suggests lighting a scented or colored candle and noticing the colors and movement of the flame for something physical to focus on. "This calming practice is important because labor becomes like a meditation," she says. The mother copes through the contraction, then uses her meditation skills to reset, refocus and ground herself before the next contraction.

Wilson and Bregman both encourage expectant mothers to keep a journal during pregnancy. "Record thoughts and experiences. Sometimes dreams tell things about the child, who has a story too," advises Wilson.

## Design a Special Experience

### Create a Birth Plan

Those that prefer a home birth can find a compatible midwife through a natural birthing community such as the National Association of Certified Professional Midwives, International Childbirth Education Association and La Leche

League. For a hospital experience, look for low-Caesarean rates, a personally compatible doctor and a distinct birthing center. Either way, a doula or midwife can help craft the desired birth plan.

Upon selecting a venue, the expectant mother may imagine the ideal birth environment and write positive statements, such as, "I want to move around freely. I want my husband and sister with me at all times."

"If a home birth is a mother's first choice, design two plans; one for home and one for the hospital," suggests Phillips. "If the mother needs hospital care during labor, the attendants will know her wishes."

Wilson encourages the spouse to be involved from the beginning. "The partner's energy plays a role in how the birth progresses during labor. Plus, being part of the planning keeps him engaged and attuned to her wishes."

### Orchestrate a Childbirth Team

"The birthing mother needs continuous support from someone that can focus on her and her needs," says Phillips. "The partner also needs to have access to experienced support. Both need to surround themselves with people that know how to enfold them in love."

A birthing team includes the medically trained attendant appointed to help deliver the baby; either a midwife or a doctor. Many women choose to have a trained doula collaborate, as well. She provides continuity of care and advocacy, lessens the need for medical intervention, stays with the mother, honors and includes the partner and supports the parents in making informed decisions.

With home births, family members tend to invite themselves over. The mom needs to have control of her birthing atmosphere. "I encourage moms to be firm regarding who they want in the room when the baby is born," Wilson says.

### Honor the Postpartum Mother

"Giving birth is the first big unknown of parenting," says Wilson. "You plan for it and then you have to trust and accept the outcome." She encourages postpartum appointments for discussing the birth.

"A breastfeeding mother's nutrient requirements are actually higher postpartum," Wilson says. To prevent deficiencies, she suggests moms nourish themselves during this period, delaying any focus on weight loss and regaining muscle tone.

The birth team and other friends can deliver meals, do light housecleaning, run a load of laundry and bring groceries. The new parents will welcome this generous and loving help.

*Deborah Shouse is a mother, writer, speaker, editor and health advocate in Kansas City, MO. Her latest book, Connecting in the Land of Dementia: Creative Activities to Explore Together, focuses on life's meaningful moments (DementiaJourney.org).*

## BLESSING THE BIRTH

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"The blessingway ceremony helps a woman prepare mentally, emotionally and spiritually for the work of birthing, opening her to instinctive abilities that will guide her in mothering," says Donna Miller Watelet, interfaith minister and co-author of *Mother Rising: The Blessingway Journey into Motherhood*.

Miller Watelet, a facilitator of dozens of blessingway rituals, shares an example of a nourishing gathering: In a comfortable and safe room, a group of friends circles the mother-to-be, signifying their support. They discuss the intention for the blessingway and invite the mom to symbolically let go of any fears blocking a harmonious experience. Once her fears are emptied out, they fill her up with affirmations, appreciations and adornments. Women can gift an object that has meaning to them, such as a bead, flower or scrap of cloth, as a sign of their commitment to her. These gifts will then be fashioned into something lasting, such as a necklace for the mother. The circle may then bind themselves together, each woman wrapping red yarn around her wrist before passing along the skein until everyone is connected. As they discuss this intertwining, they cut the binding yarn and keep the bracelets, a reminder of their caring for the new family.

"Finally, we enjoy a feast together," Miller Watelet says. "Sharing a meal reminds us to bring the intentions of the blessingway back into everyday life."