

Support for new and expectant mothers

In honor of Mother's Day, it is important to recognize that expectant and new mothers need extra care.

When hospital stays are only one to two days and extended family support may be limited, trained caregivers sometimes called doulas (a Greek word meaning "a woman who helps other women") provide non-medical support and help create a nurturing environment for the mother, father and baby.

The role of a doula or trained caregiver is to assist the mother and father in their new role as parents — and not assume the primary responsibility for the newborn. The caregiver provides something special: emotional and physical support during pregnancy — and most importantly, follow-up care at home.

Childbirth preparation often fails to address the nature of the postpartum period and the need for a postpartum support network, though the best time to arrange support is prenatally. The close-knit communities and extended families that once helped are inaccessible to most of us.

Home-based support and encouragement during the early postpartum weeks are crucial. Many women don't feel comfortable asking for or accepting help after they have had a baby (the superwoman syndrome). There are no cultural paradigms for developing postpartum support networks, and most pregnant women are so focused on pregnancy and delivery, it doesn't occur to them to focus on what comes next. Most

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have had little or nothing to do with an infant before. Many face the stress of juggling mother and wage-earner roles. Contrary to popular lore, which asserts a new mother knows how to mother because maternal instinct is a birth-right, much of mothering is learned. It can be terribly difficult to grow into motherhood without support.

Expectant and new mothers need nurturing support early on — from pregnancy through labor, birth, and especially bringing their newborn home. When immediate families (i.e., grandmothers, aunts, etc.) are inaccessible, a doula or trained caregiver can provide assistance with newborn care and daily responsibilities.

This kind of care can lead to dramatic improvements in the health and well-being of both mother and child.

New or expectant mothers seeking doula or trained caregiver services should consult with their obstetrician or family physician and check health insurance coverage.

Families should never try to hire a doula or trained caregiver on their own, but should use a licensed, bonded, and insured agency or homecare company. This ensures that the doula or trained caregiver has the proper training and credentials and that a thorough background check is done.

Another piece of advice: meet the doula or trained caregiver in advance to make sure it's a good match.

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