

# FACT SHEET

## The Fourth Trimester

### FIRST THREE MONTHS

The “**Fourth Trimester**” refers to the first three months of a baby's life and the first three months of a new mother's life, whether she is a first-time mother or a seasoned professional. It is a time of transition for baby from being in utero to living outside the womb and, just as importantly, a time of transition for the woman from **pregnancy to motherhood**.

**The baby is the candy, the mom is the wrapper.  
Once the candy is out of the wrapper,  
the wrapper is cast aside.**

Alison Steube, MD  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



While new mothers in many countries and cultures are provided special care and consideration during the Fourth Trimester, often the focus in the postpartum period is on the baby, not the mother. However, providers and policymakers alike are recognizing that new mothers need care and attention to **recover from the physical and emotional aspects** of pregnancy, childbirth, and new parenthood.

**Birth is not only about making babies.  
It is also about making mothers—  
strong, competent, capable mothers  
who trust themselves and know their  
inner strength.**

Barbara Katz Rothman, PhD



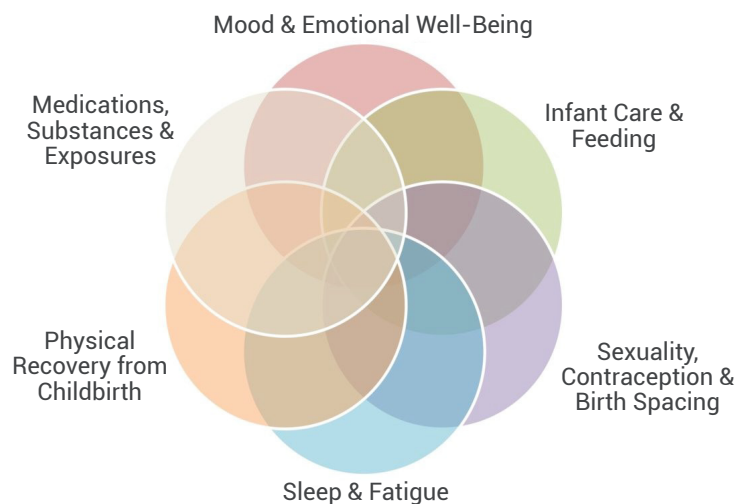
**The way a woman gives birth and  
the kind of care given to her and  
the baby points to the key values  
of the culture.**

Sheila Kitzinger, midwife

**The mother's health is just as important as the baby's.**

### CHALLENGES FACING NEW MOTHERS

By Alison Steube, MD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



### POSTPARTUM PLANNING

Why wait until baby arrives to prepare for the Fourth Trimester? Much like a birth plan helps expectant parents think through labor and delivery, a postpartum plan can help them think about the first few weeks with a new baby. Topics include sleep, infant feeding, care for other children, meals, and more. Here are a few examples:

- **Postpartum Plan** from DONA International: [bit.ly/donaplan](http://bit.ly/donaplan)
- **The Postpartum Plan** from Postpartum Support Virginia: [bit.ly/psvaplan](http://bit.ly/psvaplan)
- **Your Postpartum Vacation Prep** from Birthful: [bit.ly/prep-birthful](http://bit.ly/prep-birthful)

### 4TH TRIMESTER RESOURCES

Several books and websites are available to help new mothers navigate the Fourth Trimester with information on finding social, emotional, physical, and economic support:

- **The 4th Trimester Project** is working to elevate postpartum wellness by building knowledge, creating solutions, and advocating for change.
- **New Mom Health** provides information and resources from experts and new mothers.
- **Many books** offer information, encouragement, and support for new mothers. A sampling:
  - > *The Fourth Trimester* by Kimberly Ann Johnson
  - > *The Fourth Trimester Companion* by Cynthia Gabriel
  - > *The Fourth Trimester Journal* by Nico Berlin



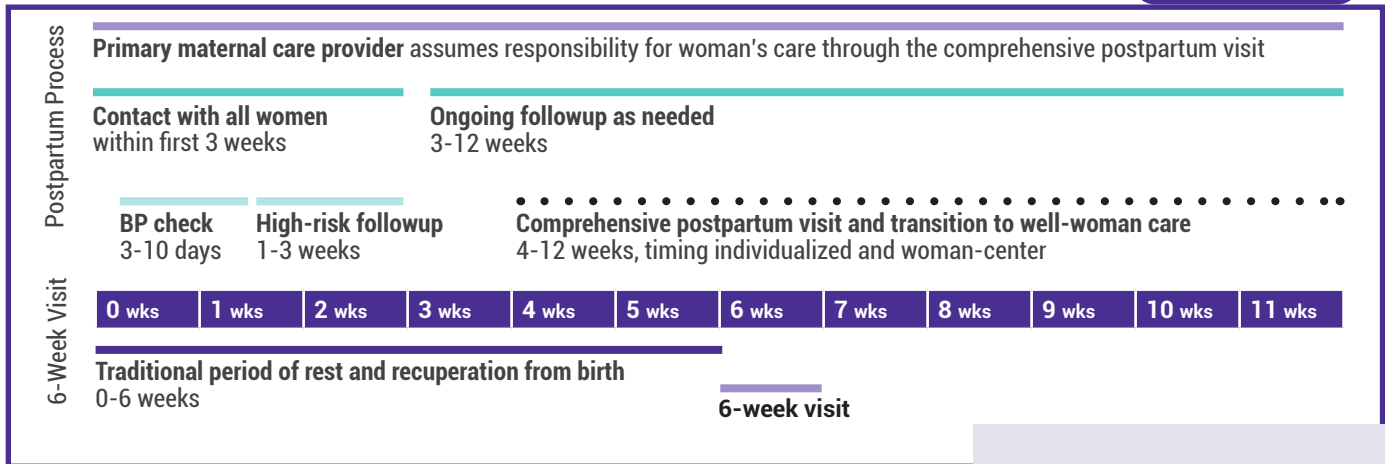
# What would it look like for mothers to not only survive pregnancy but to thrive?

Joia Crear-Perry, MD, The National Birth Equity Collaborative

## ACOG TAKES ACTION

Recognizing the importance of providing better care to new mothers, in 2018 the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) provided guidance to shift the paradigm for postpartum care from a single 6-week visit to a postpartum process (see chart below).

To optimize the health of women and infants, postpartum care should be an ongoing process, rather than a single encounter, with services and support tailored to each woman's individual needs.



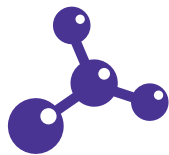
## TOOLKIT FOR POSTPARTUM CARE

Download at [bit.ly/ACOGtoolkit](http://bit.ly/ACOGtoolkit)

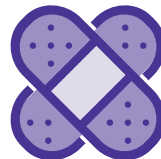
ACOG's 94-page companion toolkit includes resources on the key components of postpartum care, information about reimbursement, and a sample postpartum checklist for patients to complete before their visit. **Key components include:**



**Mental Health / Substance Use**



**Chronic Disease**



**Postpartum Complications**



**Newborn Care/ Feeding / Healthy Weight**



**Creating a Support System**



**Reproductive Planning**

ACOG underscores that the Fourth Trimester can present considerable challenges for women, including lack of sleep, fatigue, pain, breastfeeding difficulties, incontinence, all of which can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression.

For many women in the United States, the postpartum period is often devoid of formal or informal maternal support.

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

## OPTIMIZING POSTPARTUM CARE

**ACOG Committee Opinion 736**  
Download at [bit.ly/acog736](http://bit.ly/acog736)

The weeks following birth are a critical period for a woman and her infant, setting the stage for long-term health and wellbeing.

Postpartum care should be an ongoing process, rather than a single encounter, with services and support tailored to each woman's individual needs.

All women should have contact with a maternal care provider within 3 weeks of giving birth, followed up by individualized care, concluding with a comprehensive visit no later than 12 weeks postpartum.