

What is the Fourth Trimester?

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.

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.

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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

The early postpartum period is often joyful and exciting.
It is also a time of intense physiological, social, and emotional change.

Challenges New Mothers Face

- ▶ Mood & Emotional Well-Being
- ▶ Physical Recovery from Childbirth
- ▶ Infant Care & Feeding
- ▶ Sleep & Fatigue
- ▶ Medications, Substances & Exposures
- ▶ Sexuality, Contraception & Birth Spacing

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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

Resources for the 4th Trimester

Postpartum Planning Guides

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. See some example below:

- [Postpartum Plan from DONA International](#)
- [The Postpartum Plan from Postpartum Support Virginia](#)
- [Your Postpartum Vacation Prep from Birthful](#)

Websites

- [The 4th Trimester Project](#)
- [New Mom Health](#)

Books

- [The Fourth Trimester by Kimberly Ann Johnson](#)
- [The Fourth Trimester Companion by Cynthia Gabriel](#)
- [The Fourth Trimester Journal by Nico Berlin](#)

ACOG's Recommended Postpartum Process vs. the 6-Week Check-Up

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.

6-Week Check-Up Model

- ✓ 6-week postpartum check-up

NEW! ACOG's Recommended Postpartum Process

- ✓ 3-10 days: Blood pressure check
- ✓ 1-3 weeks: High-risk follow-up and mental health check-in
- ✓ 3-12 weeks: Follow-up as needed
- ✓ 12 weeks: Well woman visit

ACOG's Toolkit for Postpartum Care

ACOG's 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 — lack of sleep, fatigue, pain, infant feeding difficulties, and incontinence — all of which can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression.

[Get the Toolkit](#)

Optimizing Postpartum Care: ACOG Committee Opinion 736

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.

[Read More](#)

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

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