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## health & baby

### An Expectant Dad's Guide to Pregnancy

**You got her pregnant, but are you ready for the nine month roller coaster? Consider this your expectant father's survival guide.**

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WebMD Feature

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From now until you snip the cord, a lot may happen that no one will have prepared you for ahead of time. There's no way to anticipate every possible scenario, but you need not be completely in the dark. It's also good to have an idea of ways you can be helpful to the mom-to-be.

The thing about men and pregnancy is that there's only so much you can do -- the expectant mother really does all the work. She also gets all the attention. We all know she deserves it -- and then some -- but it's a common source of tension for couples during pregnancy, says Leonard Boulanger, a clinical social worker and fatherhood specialist for the Visiting Nurse Association and Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire. "In the whole process, the father feels that he is being ignored," Boulanger tells WebMD.

Getting involved early and "at every level," Boulanger says, not only makes things easier for the mother, but it also keeps you from feeling left out.

#### Preparing the Nest

When people talk about the changes that happen in pregnancy, they tend to say a lot about changes in the mother's body and her moods. Less tends to be said about changes in your home, which may interest you just as much as your pregnant partner's swelling bosom.

Assuming that you have been living together for at least a little while, you've settled into a domestic routine. "Expect that things she used to do are no longer easy for her to do; and even if she's willing, she won't be able to do as much," Paul Woods, MD, a family doctor (and father of four) in Hibbing, Minn., tells WebMD. "You'll willingly need to step up to the plate and do more things around the house than ever before."

Now that you're soon to be a family, your home also will contain a lot more stuff. In come the crib, changing table, nursing rocker, bassinet, swing, stroller, and car seat, plus all the baby toys and gadgets that you never knew existed, but which you now must have. If you plan to set up a nursery, get ready to decorate. Crib sheets and bumper patterns will become important topics you must be prepared to discuss at great length. Pregnant women are cautioned to avoid paint fumes, so of course all the painting they want done falls to you.

You may not be able to match the mom-to-be's level of enthusiasm, but your participation counts. "Just smile and repaint for the third time," Woods advises.

Things will be different in the bedroom, too. The bed you share may seem less cozy as she becomes more uncomfortable and sleeps fitfully, making frequent trips to the bathroom in the night. You can help by accommodating her graciously -- for example, by making room for her gigantic body pillow. You may even lose your bedmate for a while, because some pregnant women prefer to sleep in a reclining chair. Sex during pregnancy is a whole other matter on which plenty has been written.

Remember also that all smoking inside your home has to stop right away. Secondhand smoke is very bad for the baby.

## Prenatal Visits and the Expectant Father

A generation or two ago, it was unusual for an expectant father to be present during labor, let alone hang out with his pregnant wife in the exam room when she saw her doctor. Now dads are encouraged to go to prenatal care appointments.

Assuming that all goes well, there will be about 15 routine prenatal visits scheduled with varying frequency: once a month until 28 weeks, three or four times up to week 36, and once a week for the last month.

If you can make time to join your partner at all or most appointments, she will likely appreciate it, and you'll benefit from knowing what's going on. Two visits in particular are especially worthwhile: the first appointment, and the prenatal ultrasound exam. "As a physician, I want the dad there for the first appointment to talk about what will happen, and to determine parents' preferences," Woods says.

During the exam, the doctor should give both of you some general advice on having a healthy pregnancy and address any specific medical issues. You can help by paying close attention and asking thoughtful questions. The exam typically involves simple things like collecting urine and blood samples from the mother, taking her blood pressure, measuring around her middle, and weighing her.

Afterward, don't be surprised if she needs you to "spend half an hour drying tears over the weight gain and explaining that, 'no, you don't look like a cow,'" Woods says. Another thing that could catch you off guard is the internal pelvic exam, which may be done in front of you. It's a standard obstetric procedure, but to the guy standing there while his wife has one -- even a guy who happens to be a medical doctor -- "no matter what, it just seems weird," Woods says.

During the 20th week of pregnancy, an ultrasound exam is normally done. This is when many parents get a first glimpse of the baby and take home a sonogram snapshot for the baby's album. Sometimes ultrasound is used earlier in pregnancy to screen for birth defects or if a doctor suspects a problem. Ultrasound at 20 weeks can also reveal the baby's sex. You may choose to find out what it is or wait to be surprised.

## The Grand Finale

At some point, the mom-to-be will draw up her birth plan. That's a detailed description of how she wants to do labor and delivery -- where to go, who'll attend the delivery, how she intends to labor, whom she wants in the room, and what your role will be. Taking a birthing class together can help you figure out the best practical ways to support her throughout labor.

When the moment arrives, all might go according to the plan. Circumstances could also trash the plan utterly. Woods says that in his experience, having attended the birth of several hundred babies, it's usually the latter.

## The Grand Finale continued...

Because there are so many different ways for labor and delivery to play out, it's difficult to describe a typical experience for a father-to-be in much detail. Saying that any part of it will go one way or another involves a bunch of assumptions that may not be true for everyone.

Nevertheless, it's fair to assume that you'll deliver in a hospital, which is where 99% of all births in the United States occur. That means there will be doctors and nurses around, with medical support available as needed. If you plan on going to a certain hospital, you may benefit from visiting the maternity unit (what this is called differs from hospital to hospital) well in advance of the due date to get a real sense of what the place is like. Anticipate spending at least 48 hours there for the delivery.

There's no way you can predict it, but on average, for a woman having her first baby, labor lasts 12-24 hours from her first contractions to delivery. Your partner may be in the early phase of labor for many hours before the hospital will admit her. If at all possible, spend this time together and help to keep her feeling at ease. When it's time, proceed calmly to the hospital.

As labor progresses, it gets increasingly painful. Even with pain control measures, it hurts a lot. To you, it might seem like not much is happening as the hours pass. Stay focused on her. "Getting ice chips, cold cloths, foot rubs, back rubs -- suck it up, guys, it's only for a while," Woods says. "She is

experiencing pain like we can't imagine."

In the worst throes of labor, she might tell you to get the bleep out of there. "Don't walk out," says Boulanger. "Be there from beginning to end."

The birth of your child is a big event that will change your life. But no matter how deeply you care, and regardless of how supportive you are, labor and delivery is not your show. Your name is in small type at the bottom of the show bill. Even mom is in a supporting role because, really, the baby is the star.

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My Notes:



The banner features the WebMD logo on the left with the tagline "Better Information. Better Health." and "women's health" in a stylized font. In the center is a photograph of a smiling pregnant woman with a white flower in her hair. On the right, the text reads "Information and inspiration to live a balanced, fulfilling life" above a blue button that says "CLICK HERE".

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