

From PMS to PPD:
Understanding the Phases
of the Female Body

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Introduction

The female body is a mystery to most—including women! With cycles and phases, hot flashes and periods, it's no wonder people get a little confused when discussing the who, what, when, where and why of the female body. This e-book should shine a little light on the subject. When you're done reading, hopefully and newfound appreciation of the complex systems that keep our bodies in check will be developed. If not, at least you'll know just what causes PMS and why pregnant women have morning sickness.

Are you ready to learn all there is to know about the science of the female? Hold on tight! It's going to be an emotional, nausea-ridden, and otherwise stereotypically feminine ride.

Please note: this e-book is not a substitute for medical advice. If you have any conditions or complaints they should be checked out by a licensed physician. The content included herein is for informational purposes only.

Chapter 1 – It's That Time of the Month, Again

You may hear about it often. Women might refer to it as Aunt Flow, the rag or that time of the month. These colorful names all refer to the same thing: menstruation.

Menstruation

More commonly referred to as one's "period" menstruation occurs approximately every 28 days. Beginning at around the age of 12, although a little earlier or a little later is perfectly normal, a young girl will experience her first period. She will have a period every month or so until she gets pregnant or until she reaches menopause later in life.

However, during these 28 days, there is always something going on in a woman's reproductive system. The menstrual cycle takes about 28 days to complete and takes in several stages. For convenience's sake, we've divided the cycle into two halves.

Menstrual Cycle Part 1

At the beginning of the menstrual cycle, the body begins to prepare for the possibility of becoming pregnant. So, when estrogen levels rise, the body takes that as a signal to start thickening the uterine lining. At the same time, the egg or ovum is stimulated in one of the ovaries to become mature.

At the halfway point, the mature egg is released from the ovary in a process called ovulation.

Menstrual Cycle Part 2

After the egg has been released from the ovary, it begins to make its way through the fallopian tube. At this point in time, a woman can become pregnant. When the uterine lining is at its thickest and if the egg is fertilized, it will attach itself to the lining and pregnancy begins. However, if the egg is not fertilized, it is then passed from the body along with the uterine lining during menstruation. This material is passed from the body through the cervix and out through the vagina.

Dealing With The Period

There is a law of averages in play when people discuss a woman's period. The fact of the matter is, no two women are exactly alike. One woman may have a period that lasts two days, is super heavy and pain free while another may experience an eight-day period, with moderate bleeding and severe cramps. It's

really hard to say what one's experience will be.

However, in the world of averages, a period typically lasts between three to five days. Some women have to take over the counter medication to ease the discomfort associate with their period.

As an adolescent, one's period may be quite irregular and hard to predict just adding loads of fun to the already turbulent teen years. As a woman grows into maturity, her period should become more regular and predicable. If this is not the case, birth control pills are often prescribed to keep things regular and healthy.

Menstruating women have two choices between products to deal with the menstrual flow. These include pads or sanitary napkins and tampons.

Common Menstrual Problems

As you can imagine, a woman's menstrual cycle is not all fun and games. While it usually is carried out without too much problem--not including cramps and PMS, of course-- menstruation problems are common and affect many women.

Dysmenorrhea

Dysmenorrhea is essentially a condition involving painful periods. Symptoms are most often extremely painful menstrual cramps. Sometimes, an underlying condition can be causing the pain.

- Endometriosis is a painful condition involving the growth of uterine tissue in other areas of the body. When menstruation occurs, this overgrown tissue has nowhere to go, and can cause severe pain. Eventually, this condition can cause pain during sex, irregular periods and even infertility.
- Fibroids are non-cancerous tumors that attach themselves to the uterine wall. Their presence can cause painful periods, excessive bleeding and potentially infertility.

Amenorrhea

This condition is the lack of a period. A young woman may have never started her period or she may have started and then stopped having it abruptly. Causes for amenorrhea vary widely on the individual but include anything from complications from an eating disorder, stress or exercising, to pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Menorrhagia

Menorrhagia is, essentially, abnormal bleeding from the uterus or vagina. It can appear as very long periods, periods every other week, bleeding between periods much heavier than spotting, or very heavy bleeding. This condition often appears in women approaching menopause and women with hormone problems.

Period Abnormalities

As stated before, most women begin their periods between the ages of 11 and 15. This is perfectly normal. However, women who have not yet had a period by the age of 16 should see a doctor.

Other menstrual related reasons to see a healthcare provider include:

- Excessive bleeding.
- Severe abdominal cramping.
- A period that lasts much longer than normal.
- Bleeding that is more than spotting between periods.
- An abruptly stopped period.

Toxic Shock Syndrome

Toxic Shock Syndrome or TSS is a condition that can arise from the wearing of tampons. TSS can be fatal, so it is important to know the signs and symptoms and what you can do to prevent it from occurring.

Symptoms

- High fever.
- Diarrhea.
- Bloodshot eyes.
- Sudden dizziness.
- Aching muscles.
- Rash.
- Sore throat.

Preventative Measures

In order to help prevent the potentially deadly TSS, follow the instructions included with the tampon pack carefully. Also, only use tampons when you are on your period. Be mindful of your personal flow and use the lowest absorbency necessary. It is better to change your tampon often than keep the same one in for a longer period of time. Finally, change your tampon every 4-8 hours and try alternating between pads and tampons, especially on your light days.

Chapter 2 – PMS Is Not Just "Cramps"

Oh, it is the bane of most women's existence: PMS, or Premenstrual Syndrome to be exact.

Can you believe people used to believe PMS was a myth? On the contrary, it is a real condition with real symptoms that many women experience each month.

These symptoms occur about a week before your period starts and usually stop right after menstruation begins. However, many women experience PMS up to 14 days prior to their period and throughout it as well.

There is a difference between discomfort prior to your period and PMS. PMS makes it nearly impossible to function at work or at home either due to physical discomfort or emotional turmoil.

Causes of PMS

While no one knows for sure what causes PMS, it is most likely caused by the hormonal fluctuations and changes at certain points in a woman's menstrual cycle. It is important to note that PMS is not caused by any underlying psychological condition. Rather, stress and intense situations may worsen PMS symptoms.

Symptoms of PMS

The symptoms of PMS vary widely. Have you caught on yet? Just about everything related to the processes of the female body vary between individual women. However, some of the most common PMS symptoms include:

- Increased appetite.
- Depression.
- Constipation.
- Bloating.
- Edema or swollen extremities.
- Muscle and joint pain.
- Irritability and anxiousness.
- Lessened sex drive.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Tender breasts.
- Tiredness.
- Headaches.
- Difficulty concentrating.

PMS Treatments

PMS does not have a cure, but it can be treated and managed in several ways. There are many things you can do at home to manage PMS (see following section) but your doctor can also prescribe some medication should he or she deem it necessary in adequately treating your symptoms.

Antidepressants

Some women suffer from severe anxiety, nervousness and irritability as a part of PMS and are sometimes prescribed antidepressant medication to help stabilize the mood swings that would otherwise be raging due to hormonal fluctuations.

Diuretics

Diuretics are sometimes referred to as water pills because they help the body eliminate unnecessary stores of fluid and sodium--the primary culprits in PMS bloat. After some careful monitoring of your symptoms, you'll usually be advised to begin taking the diuretic pills just prior to the beginnings of your PMS symptoms.

Birth Control Pills

"The Pill" can help stabilize PMS symptoms substantially by making hormone fluctuations less intense. Birth control pills have also been shown to make periods shorter and less painful in some women. However, just like with any other medication, birth control carries with it risks of its own, and should be considered before deciding to take it.

At-Home Remedies

We've discussed what your doctor can do to help you relieve those pesky PMS symptoms, but now we're going to look at what you can do from the comfort of your own home.

There are, of course, several over-the-counter medications available to help treat PMS and other period-related problems. They usually combine a diuretic with a pain reliever. But there's more you can do to make your menstrual cycle less miserable.

- **Eat Right.** For starters, getting yourself on a healthier diet can reduce PMS symptoms. Avoid foods high in sugar and in fat and try to cut out caffeine altogether to reduce irritability. Also, lots of salt intake can really up the bloat factor. Try to reduce your salt intake the days right before your period. Lastly, break up those large meals. Three full meals a day

can be heavy on the stomach and lead to constipation, bloating and all sorts of other PMS-related troubles. Try eating six small meals rather than three large ones.

- **Sleep Right.** Try to go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning. Attempt to get a full eight hours each night. Also, establish your bed as a place of rest, not a place for eating, reading, watching TV, working or whatever else it is you do!
- **Exercise Right.** Try working out every other day on a regular basis. Try to get at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity four times a week. This keeps you in shape and helps you to feel better all the time, not just during that time of the month.
- **Schedule Right.** Although some things cannot be moved, try to move events and happenings in your life that are taxing to the week following your period. This reduces your stress level and decreases your overall suffering.

Another great way to battle PMS is to load up on the calcium. 1000 mg a day helps to reduce bloating, cramps and joint pain associated with your oncoming period. Plus, you can't ignore the other wonderful benefits of a steady diet of calcium such as strong bones, teeth and a lessened risk of developing osteoporosis later in life.

Some months, your PMS may be barely noticeable. Others, it might be uncontrollable. The female body can be quite unpredictable, hence the importance of learning about the functions and phases women go through and how we can make each of them easier to deal with.

Chapter 3 - Pregnancy

It's one of the most joyous and stressful times in a woman's life: pregnancy. While physically taxing and nerve-wracking, it is also wonderful. This section breaks down just how the process of conception works, fertility issues, how to tell if you're pregnant and what you can expect along the way!

Fertility and Conception

Some people just become pregnant out of the blue, while others have to work hard to achieve a pregnancy. A lot of it depends on where you are in your life and your own predisposition to becoming pregnant.

Preconception

There are many ways to monitor your fertility to ensure you try to conceive on the most optimum days. One of the most common ways to do this is to chart your basal body temperature or your BBT.

The BBT is the temperature of the body at rest and it can tell you a lot about a woman's fertility and where she is in her cycle. You can do this by taking your temperature with a digital thermometer at the same time each morning when you wake up. Write down the temperature for each morning, beginning on the day you first start your period.

After you ovulate, you will notice a rise in temperature of around .4 degrees. Now you know that the days prior to this increase in temperature were your most fertile days—the best time to attempt to conceive.

Another way to monitor your fertility is to chart the cervical fluid. This can be done by wiping the vaginal area with your fingers before you urinate. If you are ovulating, the fluid will be of an egg white consistency, slightly clear, wet and stretchy. This is the best time to have sex, as this type of cervical fluid is indicative of prime fertility. This phase is preceded and followed by a period of creamy, white fluid. While it may seem somewhat gross, this is your body's natural way of telling you when you're ready to conceive.

Boosting Fertility

Not every couple can have a baby just like that. In fact, many have to boost their fertility by monitoring their daily activities. Maintaining a healthy weight, eating properly and exercising regularly all contribute to an individual's ability to conceive. While it is primarily the woman that must be in the normal weight range, men should also be cautious of this factor. Along with being in good health in general, the foods you eat can play a vital role

in boosting fertility. Some foods to add to your diet include:

- Antioxidants: Green tea, in particular is a great source of antioxidants which keep the immune system high and makes sure baby will be healthy when you do conceive.
- Vitamin C: Oranges, or any other citrus fruit act as a terrific fertility booster.
- Water: Good 'ol H₂O may seem like a no brainer, but ensuring you're getting your 8-8 oz. glasses a day can work wonders on fertility.
- Calcium: Women in particular need lots of calcium to grow a healthy baby. After all, it promotes the growth of healthy bones.
- Folic Acid: Whole grains and green, leafy vegetables are great for you and baby. Eating foods rich in folic acid can actual help prevent defects.

Fertility Problems

Many couples suffer from infertility wherein the man, woman or both suffer from a condition that makes it difficult for them to conceive a child.

Infertility can be caused by:

- Ovulation problems.
- Low sperm count.
- Low quality sperm.
- Infections of the vagina, cervix, and other reproductive organs.
- Certain illnesses such as diabetes.
- STDs.
- Aging.
- Radiation exposure from cancer treatment or other sources.
- Genetic diseases.

As you can see, there are many factors contributing to a couples' ability to conceive. It only takes one problem to cause infertility; however, most couples who suffer from fertility problems have more than one problem to contend with. The best way to beat fertility issues is to see your doctor. If you have been trying to conceive for a year with no luck, it may be time to pay a visit the doctor so both man and woman can be tested.

Signs and Signals of Pregnancy

Sometimes, you might just have a sneaking suspicion that you're expecting. Not because you've skipped a period, either. Rather, the body provides several clues that one is pregnant, several weeks before a pregnancy test can even provide a result. If you've been trying to get pregnant and experience one or several of the following symptoms, you might just be expecting!

- **Light Spotting:** A bit of bleeding at the earliest stage of pregnancy is completely normal and indicates the egg has implanted itself in the uterine lining. This may also cause mild cramping.
- **Tender Breasts:** Also in the earliest parts of pregnancy, your breasts will begin to enlarge and feel fuller. They may also be quite tender, sore or just feel plain odd.
- **Nausea:** While morning sickness typically doesn't begin until around four weeks, it can start as early as two! You may feel nausea and experience vomiting, especially after having just eaten or being around any strong odor.
- **Fatigue:** In the earliest stages of pregnancy, your body is preparing to support and nurture the life that is growing inside you. Your heart pumps faster as your body produces more blood to accommodate the carrying of nutrients to baby. All of this internal work is bound to leave you feeling drained.
- **Dizziness:** A number of factors may contribute to a feeling of lightheadedness early in pregnancy. Your blood pressure drops as the blood vessels in your body expand to accommodate the increase in blood. Low blood sugar can also contribute to this sensation of faintness.
- **Constipation:** Fatigue is a common symptom of pregnancy. Funnily enough, this fatigue does not just slow down how you feel and function. It also slows down the digestive tract. With high levels of the hormone progesterone in your system, digestion slows down, leading to potential constipation.
- **Cravings and Aversions:** Pregnant women are known for their killer sense of smell. Little do people know that it is this heightened olfactory awareness that causes women to become violently ill at a whiff of certain foods. Primary culprits include coffee, spicy foods, meats and dairy products. Pregnant women are also known for their out of this world cravings. Your food actually tastes different in early pregnancy as hormones prepare your body to grow a human being.
- **Elevated BBT:** Your BBT or Basal Body Temperature is your temperature immediately after you wake up in the morning. Many women use the BBT to monitor their ovulation, as it is slightly raised at this point in the cycle. If your BBT is raised for two weeks or more after ovulation, you're very likely pregnant!

Each trimester of your pregnancy brings with it unique challenges. Your expectations of yourself and others will change as your body changes. The

following breaks down what you can expect out of each trimester of your pregnancy, along with how to stay healthy for baby—mind, body and soul.

First Trimester

This is it! You're pregnant and may not even know it yet as a tiny baby begins to grow inside you. But becoming pregnant brings with it massive changes. Pregnancy is one of the most physically demanding tasks a woman can endure, so brushing up on some of the basics certainly can't hurt.

Symptoms

Much of the symptoms you'll encounter during the first trimester of pregnancy are the same or similar to those that may have indicated you were pregnant to begin with. As hormones begin to rush throughout your body in preparation for a brand new life, you may experience nausea, dizziness, fatigue, sore breasts, and frequent urination. It can be difficult dealing with these symptoms, but with a bit of knowledge you can battle these pregnancy ailments like a pro.

For instance, if you're experiencing morning sickness, eating smaller meals, keeping saltines nearby and avoiding odors that make you queasy can help to squelch the nausea. Or, if you're lightheaded, avoid standing in one spot for lengthy periods of time and stand very slowly when getting up from a nap or from sitting. It may seem impossible to deal with at first, but you can learn to cope with these early pregnancy symptoms.

Prenatal Exam

This should be the first thing on your pregnancy to-do list. While you may want to go out to find cute things to decorate the nursery with, the first thing you should do upon finding out you're pregnant is to set up an appointment with your healthcare provider. This initial appointment will cover a lot of ground regarding you, your health and your baby. Expect to go through all of the following:

- Health assessment. Basically, you'll undergo a regular physical exam to determine your overall health. Expect to be weighed, have a height measurement taken and to have your heart listened to.
- Medical History. Even though it's annoying and it seems like you're always asked the same questions each time you go to the doctor, this time, your healthcare provider will ask questions with your pregnant state in mind. You will be asked about your menstrual cycle, allergies, and family history of certain medical conditions including genetic defects.
- Pelvic Exam. Your healthcare provider will evaluate the vagina and the cervix for abnormalities. They will also look to confirm how far along in

your pregnancy you are.

- **Blood Samples.** No one likes needles, but blood tests are absolutely necessary to have important information about you on file. They will test to see what your blood type is, for Rh factor and to see if you have been exposed to diseases such as syphilis, measles and hepatitis B.
- **Urine Samples.** Yes, you need to pee in a cup. But this test is good for determining whether or not you have a kidney or bladder infection and can determine if you are a candidate for gestational diabetes.
- **Due Date.** One of the most important things you'll learn at your prenatal exam is your due date! This is determined by taking the date of your last period and adding 40 weeks.

Diet and Exercise

A prenatal vitamin should become a part of your daily regimen right when you find out your pregnant. If you smoke, you'll need to quit right away, along with ceasing the consumption of alcohol. Remember: whatever you put in your body, you're also putting in your baby's body.

With your healthcare provider's go-ahead, you should be able to maintain your regular fitness routine. If you're not one for exercising, take up walking. This will help you maintain a healthy weight during your pregnancy and keep up your strength for when it comes time to deliver.

Development

By now, you may be wondering what baby is up to in the womb while you're keeping doctor's visits and puking up a storm. The first trimester is the first three months of your baby's life. Let's look at it by week.

Weeks 1-3 are devoted to becoming pregnant: They include your last period, conception and the actual point the fertilized egg becomes implanted in the uterus.

Weeks 4-6: At week 4, baby is officially an embryo and begins to develop major organ systems such as the brain and spinal cord. Week 5 brings the first beats of your baby's heart and Week 6 brings the first hint of facial features.

Weeks 7-9: The appearance of the umbilical cord, completed limbs, fingers and toes and the first hints of movement mark these three weeks in your baby's development. Note: even though baby may begin to move as early as week 9, you will not be able to feel it yet.

Weeks 10-12: The embryonic tail disappears at week 10 and bones begin to form. At week 11, baby is officially a fetus and the sex of the baby can now be easily determined. Up to three inches long at week 12, baby begins to form fingernails and toenails.

Second Trimester

We're moving right along! Many women consider the second trimester to be the most enjoyable of pregnancy. Most of the morning sickness and fatigue have subsided by now and baby is not big enough to make your internal organs feel squashed leaving you horribly uncomfortable. Enjoy these three months while they last!

Symptoms

Many of the bodily symptoms associated with the second trimester of pregnancy are common sense, but they still need to be mentioned. After all, it's better to know what to expect, right?

- **The Ever-Expanding Tummy:** Of course your belly grows! In fact, you'll probably gain around 4 pounds every month until it's time to deliver. As your baby grows, your uterus grows. As your uterus grows your abdomen grows too.
- **Bigger Breasts:** Did you know your breasts can grow up to two cup sizes during pregnancy? The hormones surging through your body stimulate the glands that produce milk in your breasts. Fat can also accumulate in the breasts.
- **Constipation:** You may have experienced constipation during the first trimester as well, but it can still be quite a problem throughout the rest of your pregnancy. As your baby grows, she presses on your internal organs, causing the digestive system to slow down considerably, resulting in complications such as constipation.
- **Discharge:** A bit of extra vaginal discharge during the second trimester is completely normal. It is believed that this highly acidic discharge helps to fight off bacteria that could potentially enter the vagina.
- **Braxton-Hicks:** You can consider these contractions as "practice" contractions. Your uterus has a very big job to do come delivery day, so it starts to build its strength early on. Painless contractions in the lower abdominal and groin areas are perfectly normal.
- **Bladder Infections:** The longer urine sits in your bladder, the more likely you are of developing a bladder infection. As the uterus grows, it presses

on the bladder, further slowly down the flow of urine. Be sure to drink plenty of water to combat this unpleasant side effect.

- **Dizziness and Shortness of Breath:** As your body prepares for baby, blood vessels expand yet may not have a sufficient enough blood volume to fill them, causing you to feel dizzy. While this problem will generally work itself out, it's best to avoid standing for long periods of time to combat the lightheadedness. Likewise, your lungs are filling up with more oxygen than they ever have before, leaving you feeling slightly out of breath.
- **Darkened Skin:** Because of all of this increased blood flow, your skin can change pigment as well, especially the nipples, genital area and face. While you may end up with a healthy glow, you may also end up a bit blotchy!
- **Heartburn:** Again, your digestive system slows way down during pregnancy. When you eat, the food is pushed down the esophagus much slower than normal, leaving you with a nasty case of heartburn.
- **Sinus Congestion:** While this increased blood flow thing has been good for the rest of your body, it can be quite disruptive to the nasal passages. In fact, as your blood volume increases, the mucous membranes of the nose and sinuses swell up, leaving you feeling congested.

Prenatal Care

You should be getting quite friendly with your obstetrician by now! During the second trimester, you'll probably have an appointment once a month to make sure everything is right on track. Here are some things you should expect at the doctor's office.

Tests: Lots of them, too! Everything from the standard diagnostic procedures like blood tests, urine tests and blood pressure checks will be performed to make sure you are in tip-top shape. Likewise, your weight will be monitored closely, as will the size of your abdomen.

Movement: At around 20 weeks, you should feel baby move for the first time. Your healthcare provider will want to know when you first feel movement in the womb.

Heartbeat: An ultrasound will be performed to gain a visual of the baby and make sure everything is fine developmentally. At this time, you'll be able to hear the baby's heartbeat.

Prenatal Testing: While certainly not necessary, it is always a good idea to consider having prenatal testing done to determine the risk of congenital defects,

genetic diseases and other such problems. Common tests performed are blood tests to check for genetic problems, ultrasounds for development problems and more invasive tests such as the amniocentesis to check for specific conditions.

Diet and Exercise

If you were active before your pregnancy and during the first trimester, there is no reason why you cannot continue to be so during the second trimester, with your doctors' permission, of course. Avoid jarring physical activities, however and anything that may put your balance at risk. As your belly grows, your center of gravity becomes quite thrown off, making it more likely than ever you'll take a tumble. Activities to avoid include hiking, mountain biking, skiing and anything else that puts your tummy at risk.

You may notice your appetite increasing. While you are not literally eating for two, you will have to eat a bit more (of healthy foods, that is) to keep up a higher caloric intake. You need to keep your energy up so baby can grow healthy and strong. Try eating several smaller meals throughout the day to keep those carbohydrates in your system.

Development

Now you're really cooking! Baby is changing each and every day and she's looking more and more like an actual little person! Here's the week-by-week rundown of what the little one is doing in the womb.

Weeks 13-15: Baby starts kicking and moving all over the place at week 13, even though you can't feel it yet. The sex of the baby continues to become more and more apparent with the prostate developing in males and the ovaries moving into place in females. Likewise, at week 15, baby will develop skin and possibly hair follicles.

Weeks 16-18: The fetus can now make a fist and is capable of simple facial expressions. At week 17, fat begins to be stored in the body for protection and warmth afterbirth. The ears will become functional as well, allowing baby to hear your heartbeat, stomach grumble and loud noises from outside the womb.

Weeks 19- 21: A protective coating called vernix now covers baby's skin. At 20 weeks, you're halfway through your pregnancy and baby's movements are probably perceivable by you now. At week 21, baby can swallow amniotic fluid and gain nourishment from it.

Weeks 22-24: Your baby will begin to develop the sense of touch and try touching everything around him or her. Amazingly, females are now equipped with all of the eggs they will ever have at this point. The lungs prepare for breathing outside the womb at week 23 and the skin slowly loses its

transparency. Baby has a completely developed inner ear at this point and can tell if he is upside down or right side up. Baby will also sleep and wake regularly.

Weeks 25-27: While nerve connections are not fully developed as of yet, baby will still use her hands to touch and feel all that is around her. Hair on the head, eyebrows and eyelashes are forming well and fully. At the end of the second trimester, baby will have at least tripled her length from the end of the first trimester.

Third Trimester

You're nearing the end of the exciting journey of pregnancy. You might be counting the hours until the end, or enjoying every last minute of it. Each woman's experience is different.

Symptoms

While much of the annoying symptoms you experienced at the beginning of pregnancy have now passed by, you may find yourself more uncomfortable than ever or suffering from new symptoms altogether. The following should give you an idea of what to expect.

- Swelling: Swollen feet are no stranger to pregnant women in the third trimester. As your belly continues to grow, it presses on the veins that bring the blood back out of the legs, leaving them swollen. With all of those dilated blood vessels, other parts of the body may begin to swell as well such as the face and hands.
- Backaches: As baby grows, so does your abdomen throwing a considerable amount of strain on your lower back. Not to mention the fact that hormones during pregnancy work to loosen the ligaments between your bones. This places an even larger strain on your back.
- Varicose Veins: If you notice blue or raised veins on your body you have varicose veins. These appear most frequently in the legs during pregnancy. Since the veins in the pelvis are somewhat compressed, blood tends to pool in the legs, causing unsightly eruptions.
- Increased Urination: Expect to be running to the bathroom often during the last trimester of your pregnancy. As baby grows, the more she will press on your bladder making it feel as though you have to go all the time. Plus, once baby drops nearer to your due date, the pressure will increase even more.
- Bigger Breasts: Yes, they keep on growing! Women tend to gain 1-3 pounds of breast tissue during pregnancy! Also, as your due date draws

near, expect to begin to leak colostrum, the nutrient-rich substance your baby will survive on for a few days after birth.

- **Increased Weight:** About 30 pounds of weight gain is normal during pregnancy. While baby factors into part of this added weight, so do several other things such as the placenta, the extra blood in your system, increased fat and a fluid retention.

Prenatal Care

Your doctor visits will become more frequent now as your due date approaches. Expect more pelvic exams and general discussion of the condition of your cervix. You will also be tested for certain conditions during the third trimester including:

- **Group B Strep:** Group B Strep is a bacteria that lives in the rectum or vagina of some women. While it is not harmful to you, it can cause a serious infection if baby is exposed to it at birth. If you test positive for this bacteria, you will most likely be required to go on antibiotics during labor.
- **Anemia:** If you are found to be anemic, wherein you have a low red blood cell count, you'll need to take iron supplements to boost the hemoglobin in your blood. Being anemic during pregnancy can cause slowed development and even preterm labor.
- **Diabetes:** Some women experience gestational diabetes, a form of diabetes that is only present during pregnancy. If you are diagnosed, a proper diet should be able to manage the problem.

Your baby's position will also be monitored. If your baby is breech, or feet down, the doctor may attempt to turn the baby using a procedure called external version, where he presses on the abdomen in a certain way to encourage the baby to turn. C-Section is always a possibility in the case of a breech baby.

After week 36, you'll most likely be asked to come once a week until you begin labor.

Diet and Exercise

If everything looks good, you will most likely be able to continue your fitness plan as normal. Just avoid any activities that put your balance in question. Also, avoid any strenuous weight lifting, as this can also throw you off balance and it places a large amount of pressure on the abdomen.

And remember: you're not eating for two, but you are eating for more than one! A slightly increased caloric intake is necessary to ensure both you and baby receive all the proper nutrients.

Development

It's on now! Baby is developing fast and changing everyday inside the womb. Keep reading to find out what your baby is doing as you get closer to your due date.

Week 28-30: Baby's eyes can open and close now and you'll be much more aware of her movements. As her bones harden, her kicks will be much more noticeable. Baby will also continue to gain weight, up to a 1/2 pound a week, from here on out.

Week 31-33: Baby's lungs continue to develop to maturity. If he is born at this point, the survival rate is extremely high. Also, the hair that has covered his skin now begins to fall out. By week 33, he can see light and his pupils contract and dilate.

Week 34-36: That white, filmy coating called vernix now becomes much thicker and may even still be visible at birth. You will probably not feel baby moving quite as much, as he's growing rapidly and room is running out! He can also suck now and is probably moving into the head down position to prepare for birth.

Week 37-39: Congratulations! Baby is full-term at 37 weeks. She continues to put on weight and store fat, giving her that baby roundness at the time of birth. The brain continues to develop, as it will continue to do so all throughout childhood.

Week 40: It's here! Your due date has arrived and baby should make an appearance in the world anytime now.

Labor and Delivery

The time has finally arrived! You're watching a favorite TV show rerun, when all of a sudden you feel your very first contraction. Don't panic! Call who you need to call, pick up that overnight bag and head off to the hospital once your contractions are five minutes apart.

Stage 1: Early Labor

It may be hard to determine exactly when labor starts, unless your water breaks or contractions become regular immediately. You may experience Braxton Hicks contractions all the way up until labor starts. Or, your contractions may be so mild at first you don't notice them.

However, once early labor starts you may experience pain with these contractions. Some women can go about their household activities during early labor. In fact, some report it takes their mind off of the impending more intense

labor and allows them to relax. The key is to do what makes you most comfortable. Take a walk or take a bath.

You'll also experience a greater rate of vaginal discharge called bloody show, as it is often a bit bloody. You will most likely be able to wait out early labor from the comfort of your own home

Once your contractions become more regular, it will be time to go to the hospital, although the precise time you need to go should be discussed with your healthcare provider at one of your prenatal meetings.

You're best bet for dealing with this stage of labor is to take it easy, drink plenty of water and urinate often. You want to maintain your energy for the more difficult stages of labor.

Stage 1: Active Labor

Contractions now become more frequent and more intense. Your cervix continues to dilate from 4 cm at the beginning of active labor to 10cm at the end. Baby will most likely descend further into the pelvis, placing pressure on the rectum.

You can expect to be in active labor for about six hours on average. It may be best to change the position you're in, walk around or get on all fours to cope with the contractions. You will also want to try to rest as much as possible between them.

A nice massage from your partner, practicing breathing techniques and encouragement can help you get through this phase. Now is also the time to get an epidural if you want one.

Stage 1: Transition

You're in the home stretch of labor. Your cervix will dilate from around 8 to 10cm and your contractions will get even closer together and more intense. You may feel nauseous and have the urge to vomit. You may also find yourself shivering as though cold. You'll also begin to feel pressure on your rectum as baby descends further into the birth canal.

Stage 2: Pushing

It's show time! With each contraction you'll now most likely have the urge to push. With your caregiver's okay, it's time to bear down and push with all your might. As baby makes his way further down the birth canal, you'll begin to feel pressure on your perineum. At some point, the doctor may instruct you to stop pushing in order to allow the perineum to stretch naturally. Pushing too hard and

too fast can cause tears.

It won't be long now. Once baby crowns and his face appears, his mouth and nose will be suctioned. Baby's shoulders are delivered one at a time and then it's over! Your child has arrived!

Without an epidural, delivery can take around an hour for a first time mother. With an epidural can take a bit longer.

Take these moments while waiting for Stage 3 to enjoy your baby.

Stage 3: Placental Delivery

After a few minutes of rest, your uterus will begin to contract once again to detach the placenta from the uterine wall. Once it has, in fact, detached, you'll be instructed to push gently. Once the placenta is delivered, your uterus will contract, closing off any open blood vessels.

You may wish to try to nurse your baby now. Even if he is not ready to do so, just hold him close to the breast and he may latch on eventually.

Any tears or problems will be taken care of at this point. You can use that time to bond with baby and your partner. It's an exciting time and you certainly don't want to let routine doctor checks and such interfere.

Chapter 4 - Motherhood

You've gone through the grueling hours of labor and delivery, and now it's time to enjoy your newborn. While you may not get enough sleep and will feel like you're running on empty, the sheer joy that a child brings is enough to make up for all of the sacrifices.

Taking Baby Home

While your body went through massive changes during pregnancy (and will continue to do so postpartum) your life will also change dramatically now that baby has arrived. Once you get home you'll more than likely want to take a nap. The old adage, sleep when baby sleeps is a good one to follow. You and your partner may wish to introduce the little one to his or her new home and then tuck them in their new crib.

New fathers can help out by taking care of household duties, changing diapers and letting mom get some well-deserved sleep. You may even wish to take a nap together while baby sleeps. You probably haven't had very much alone time these past few days, so take these relaxing moments for all they're worth.

You should also expect visits from family and friends at this point in time. Everyone will be enthusiastic to see your baby, but be careful not to run yourself ragged. Be honest with family when you're tired and need to rest rather than socialize.

While you'll most likely feel overwhelmed, remember that there are always people to help you. Your partner, your family and friends are more than willing to lend a helping hand so you can have some time for yourself.

Becoming a "Mom"

It may be a bit strange to take on this new role as "mother," considering the only mother in your life up until now has been your own. Becoming a mom isn't that difficult in the sense that you must suddenly begin acting like one. For most women, it will be instinctual. You will naturally worry about the wellbeing of your child and do your best for them all the time. However, as your child grows, the skills necessary to cope with your child's behavior are learned. Just as with every other role in life or even jobs, the finer details are learned, not inherited.

A lot of new moms and even many not so new moms feel as though they lose a bit of themselves or a bit of their personal identity upon becoming a mother. While it may feel this way, it certainly doesn't have to be this way.

Letting a child take over your entire life is not very healthy. You still need things

for yourself as well like your career, love life and hobbies. While you may not be able to devote as much time to these things as before, you can still keep your “old” self alive and kicking.

Postpartum Depression

While many women experience what is called the “baby blues” or a period of about a week after baby is born where she is a bit depressed, postpartum depression is an entirely different story. Between 10-15% of women experience postpartum depression to some degree and while the condition is treatable, it’s very serious.

Postpartum depression can be defined as the onset of serious mood changes anywhere from one month to one year after baby is born. It is much more serious than the baby blues and must be treated by a doctor with appropriate therapy and medication.

Causes

Postpartum depression is believed to be caused by the radical shifting of hormones after childbirth. While some women only experience mild mood swings, others are thrown into the depths of depression.

Symptoms

PPD can express itself in several different ways. While the symptoms are very much like those of regular depression, there are a few key differences. Common symptoms of postpartum depression include:

- Lethargy.
- Hopelessness.
- Lack of appetite.
- Inability to sleep.
- Restlessness.
- Continuous crying.
- Mood swings.
- Lack of interest in once enjoyed activities.
- Lack of interest in baby.
- Confusion.
- Fear of harming oneself.
- Fear of harming baby.

Likely Candidates

As with all mood disorders and instances of depression, a family history of the disease automatically predisposes you to becoming diagnosed. You are also more likely to have postpartum depression if you have suffered from depression prior to pregnancy, or suffered from postpartum depression with a prior pregnancy. An unhappy or stressed marriage can also contribute to a woman's likelihood of developing the disorder. Women without close relatives or friends to discuss their feelings with are also more likely to become depressed.

Many women feel ashamed of their feelings and disinterest in their baby when suffering from postpartum depression, so do not share them with their spouse or loved ones. While it is understandable why a woman would feel this way, there is no need to be ashamed or feel guilty. PPD is no one's fault (except for maybe hormones). If you think you may be suffering from PPD, it is imperative you notify someone so you can seek proper treatment. PPD left untreated can escalate into a more serious condition or leave you unhappy for a long time.

Treatments

Upon seeing your doctor, he or she will evaluate you to rule out any sort of physiological problem first. Next, you'll be evaluated and then diagnosed with PPD. Once diagnosed, you can receive proper treatment. The most common forms of treatment for PPD include a combination of medication and therapy. Antidepressants can help restore the chemical balance to your brain, therefore lifting your mood and allowing you to enjoy life once again. The therapy portion provides women with the proper coping skills.

Many women also enroll in a support group to help get through this trying time with women that are going through the same or similar thing. It is also very important for women to continue their treatment plan until their doctor says otherwise. To stop medication suddenly is dangerous and increases the likelihood of a relapse.

Psychosis

A small portion of women suffering from postpartum depression end up suffering from postpartum psychosis. The depression in these women has escalated out of control to the point where they hear voices, hallucinate and fantasize about the death of their baby. It is often characterized by "command hallucinations to kill the infant, or delusions that the infant is possessed," according to HealthyMinds.org.

Postpartum psychosis can tragically end in infanticide. Treatment for mental disorders is very important. It can save lives.

What Your Partner Can Do

Sometimes, a woman's husband or partner may not understand just what PPD is, and place guilt on the woman. In most cases, your partner is willing to help you and be there for you, he just may not know how. The partner of a woman with postpartum depression can do several things to help speed up the healing process including:

- Make yourself available: Many new fathers are feeling overwhelmed, too. But you can help your wife considerably by making yourself available to her. Be open to talk and listen to her feelings
- Don't judge: Being judgmental of your partner's feelings can be incredibly detrimental to her health. Be honest but don't make her feel guilty for being sick—she can't help it. And with your help, she can get better faster.
- Take on responsibilities: New moms feel overwhelmed. You can help her deal with it all better by cleaning up the house, cooking meals and taking care of the baby more often so she can rest.
- Be observant: if the mother of your child is acting strangely, shows no interest in the baby at all or does not care about her own life, contact her doctor immediately.

Above all else, it's important to be aware of your body and your mental state. You can easily avoid unnecessary complications by keeping a close watch on your own emotions.

Getting Back To Normal

Having a baby changes everything. As cliché as it sounds, it's true. Regardless of whether you had a baby a month ago or ten years ago, having a child creates a whole new set of demands in your life. But, you can regain some bit of normalcy in your life after the upheaval of having a newborn settles down.

Redefining "normal" for your life is essential to being happy. You will no longer be able to go anywhere you want at any time. You have to consider your baby in every decision you make. The sooner you accept this, the happier you'll be.

Knowing when to ask for help can also take a bit of the burden off of you. You can't be expected to take care of your child every day and night without a moment's rest for yourself. Have a close friend or relative baby sit every once in awhile so you can take a nice long bath, read a book or spend a night out with your partner.

Getting back to normal also involves regaining the body back you had prior to

pregnancy. While you won't go back to stick thin right away, you can certainly begin to up your exercise levels and lower your caloric intake within a few weeks after giving birth (with your doctor's permission, of course).

Becoming a mother is a life-changing event, but it doesn't mean you have to change your entire life. Keep your hobbies and interests alive by planning time to participate in them. Keep your love life alive by taking time out to spend with your partner. Go out to dinner, see a movie or just have a nice relaxing night at home without baby.

Chapter 4 - Menopause

Being a woman can be quite the rollercoaster ride. Since puberty, you've been able to conceive a child. Your body went through massive changes and your emotions may have been all over the spectrum. During pregnancy, a life grows inside of you and as a mother, you devote much of your time and energy to raising this life. Now, as a woman in her late 40's or early 50's, you'll experience yet another change: menopause.

What many people don't realize is that menopause is a very gradual process. You do not go from being a woman able to conceive to a woman unable to conceive in a matter of days. It can start as early as your 30's and last into your 60's.

Menopause is associated with several changes including hormonal, physiological and even psychological changes. Knowing what to expect can save you a lot of grief when your body starts to suddenly change and you don't know why.

Symptoms

To call them symptoms makes it seem as though menopause is a disease. While it is certainly not a disease, it does carry with it several signs and symptoms that can be a bit unpleasant. Common symptoms of menopause include:

- Lowered fertility.
- Urinary frequency.
- Urinary incontinence.
- Increased incidence of urinary tract infections.
- Vaginal itching and burning.
- Decreased vaginal lubrication.
- Unpredictable periods.
- Night sweats.
- Inability to sleep through the night.
- Hair growth on your face, chest or abdomen.
- Weight gain.
- Thinning hair.
- Acne.
- Hot flashes.
- Irritability.
- Fatigue.
- Decreased Memory.

What Causes Menopause to Start?

Menopause begins once the ovaries start to slow down estrogen production and you will be increasingly less likely to become pregnant. The first phase of menopause is called peri-menopause. It consists of the signs and symptoms of menopause even though you are still ovulating and can become pregnant. Your hormone levels rise and fall radically. The second phase occurs once you have not had a menstrual period for 12 consecutive months. It is called postmenopause and you will live the rest of life in this phase.

What Can Trigger Premature Menopause?

While menopause is a completely natural process, it can be set off earlier than normal due to surgery or some medical treatments.

A hysterectomy that involves the removal of the uterus but not the ovaries will typically not cause menopause to start, but one that does involve the removal of the ovaries can cause menopause to kick into gear. There is no perimenopause in women who have this procedure. Instead, they'll experience menopause symptoms and will cease to menstruate immediately. Women who have undergone radiation therapy as a part of their cancer treatment may also go through an early menopause

Medical Treatment Options

While menopause is not a condition to treat, per say, the symptoms it causes can be unpleasant and can be relieved with certain medical treatments. There are also many conditions that are more prevalent in postmenopausal women that can be treated as well.

- Low-dose anti-depressants have been shown to reduce hot flashes.
- Non-hormonal treatments such as Fosamax and Actonel that help to prevent osteoporosis and reduce bone loss.
- Local estrogen is sometimes applied to the vagina to help relieve dryness and some urinary tract problems associated with menopause.
- HT or hormone therapy is the most commonly used medication to treat the symptoms of menopause. While it can offer considerable relief for your menopause symptoms, the extra estrogen can increase your risk of heart attack, stroke and even breast cancer.

At-Home Remedies

There are many things you can do from the comfort of your own home to relieve the symptoms of menopause. They include:

- Just staying sexually active during menopause can help decrease the vaginal discomfort. The use of water-based lubricants can also help ease the dryness and irritation during intercourse and throughout the day.
- Eat a well-balanced diet filled with fruits, green, leafy vegetables, whole grains and plenty of calcium.
- Exercise regularly and wear layers to help zap those hot flashes.
- Avoid things that seem to bring on hot flashes such as really warm rooms, alcohol or hot foods.
- Get the best sleep you can by learning how to wind down at night with relaxation techniques like meditation.
- Practice Kegels everyday. These exercises help to strengthen the pelvic floor and help to fend off urinary incontinence.
- See your doctor regularly. Having regularly scheduled check ups helps you feel secure in yourself and allows you to receive any medical treatment you may need as soon as you need it.

While the road in life women must walk on may be quite a bumpy one, it is one filled with changes and experiences that are truly remarkable. Only by understanding our bodies and the processes they go through can we truly appreciate the wonder that is woman.