

Coping with Stress After a Preterm Birth

This handout gives tips for coping with stress after giving birth to a preterm infant.

After a preterm delivery, it is common to feel worried about many things, such as your family, finances, and what to expect in the next few months. Other parents in your situation have found help from the support of loved ones and others who are or have been in their situation, finding resources, taking the time to rest, and talking with their health care providers about ways to minimize stress.

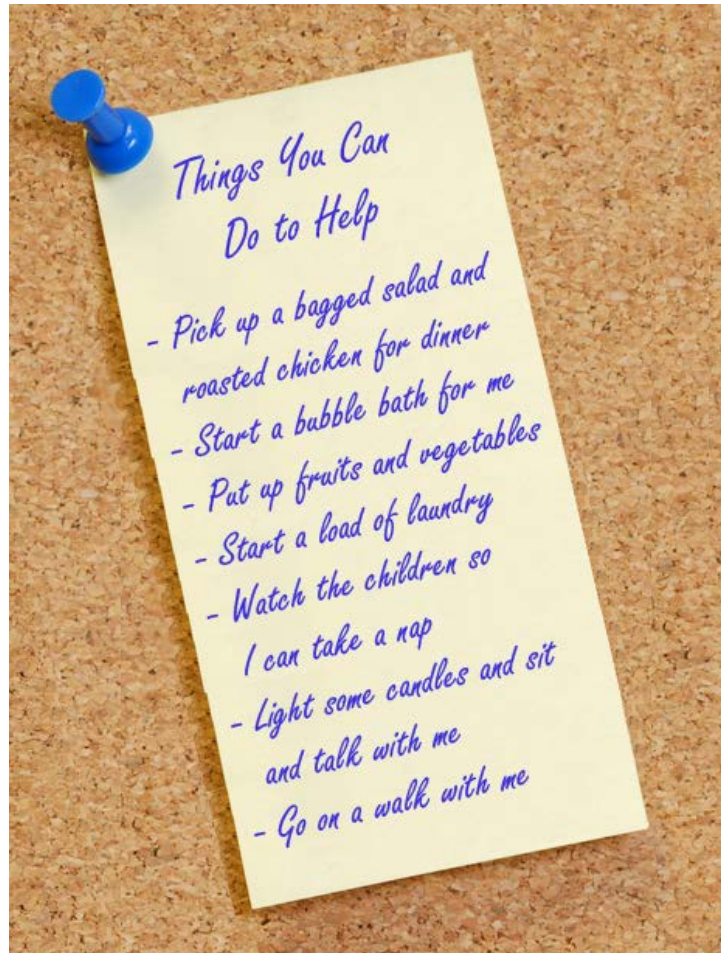
Support Yourself

- Do your best, but accept that perfection is not possible.
- Get involved by learning about support groups for parents of preterm infants in your area. Talk about your stress and connect with others who have had a similar experience.
- Take a time-out. Do deep breathing exercises, take a bubble bath or soak your feet in warm water, meditate, count to 10, try yoga exercises, take a walk.
- Talk with a friend, write your thoughts in a journal, laugh when you can.
- Avoid dealing with stress in unhealthy ways. Limit alcohol and caffeine, and avoid smoking and second-hand smoke.
- Accept that you cannot control everything. Try to let go of what you cannot control, and focus on what you can do to make things better. Take 1 day at a time.
- Eat healthy foods and well-balanced meals. Your body needs to restore all of its reserves. Continue to take a prenatal vitamin or a daily multivitamin with 400 mcg of folic acid.
- Moving your body may help ease your mind. Short daily walks are better than 1 big exercise period once a week, especially if you are feeling anxious or sad.



Giving yourself a time-out is a healthy way to deal with stress.

- Accept help. Friends and family really want to help out during this challenging time. Do not try to do everything on your own. Talk with friends and family and ask for their help. Then, make a list of things they can do to help and post it on the refrigerator:



Physical Activity Helps Reduce Stress

- Talk with your provider before starting an exercise program. Usually, if you did not have complications after delivery, you can follow the same exercise guidelines you followed when you were pregnant.
- Walking is safe soon after giving birth. Build up slowly. If you did not exercise before, you may want to begin by walking 1 block and increasing to 2 or 3 blocks the next day.
- It is a good idea to stretch after you begin walking. This helps your muscles warm up.
- Slowly increase how often and how fast you walk. Cool down by slowing down at the end of your walk.

- If you had a Cesarean birth, a difficult birth, or complications, it may take a little longer to feel ready to start exercising. Also, do not do full sit-ups (crunches) until your doctor says it is OK to do them, probably at your postpartum check-up 6 to 8 weeks after giving birth.



It is common for a woman to feel sad or tearful after her pregnancy is over.

About “Baby Blues”

After all pregnancies, the hormones in a woman’s body greatly decrease quickly. It is common for this sudden change in hormone levels to make you feel overwhelmed, sad, tearful and stressed. As many as 8 out of 10 mothers have these feelings, which are often called “baby blues.”

These feelings usually go away within 1 to 2 weeks. But, after a preterm birth, you are more likely to have these symptoms longer. If these symptoms last for more than 2 weeks or they are getting worse, talk with your health care provider or counselor. You may have *postpartum mood/anxiety disorder* or postpartum depression. This disorder can affect 10% to 20% of women (10 to 20 out of 100 women) anytime in the first year after giving birth.

Remember that stress after a preterm delivery is common, and it can be treated.

To Learn More

You may find these online resources helpful:

From American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists:

- “Getting in Shape After Your Baby Is Born”
www.acog.org/~/media/For%20Patients/faq131.ashx?dmc=1&ts=20111221T1621555883
- “Postpartum Depression”
www.acog.org/~/media/For%20Patients/faq091.ashx?dmc=1&ts=20111221T1622337621

From Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- “Depression Among Women of Childbearing and Reproductive Age”
www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/Depression/index.htm

From Anxiety Disorders Association of America:

- “Tips to Manage Anxiety and Stress”
www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety/tips

From March of Dimes:

- “Postpartum Feelings”
www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/postpartum.html



Many websites offer support for families affected by premature births.

From U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, National Women's Health Information Center:

- "Stress and Your Health Fact Sheet"
www.womenshealth.gov/faq/stress-your-health.cfm

Online Support for Families Affected by Prematurity

March of Dimes

www.marchofdimes.com/baby/premature_NICUexperience.html

(English)

www.nacersano.org/prematuro/9324.asp (Spanish)

A comprehensive source of information, articles, and support for families affected by premature birth that includes how to cope when your baby dies and how to care for yourself. They also have a list of faith-based and secular national resources to support families dealing with the birth of a premature infant.

Mental Health Ministries

www.mentalhealthministries.net

An online faith-based community that offers support and information to those who are dealing with the stigma of mental illness.

Postpartum Support International

www.postpartum.net

Online support for women who are suffering from mood and anxiety disorders related to pregnancy. Their website also provides links to local resources and offers phone chats for both women and men.

Share Your Story

www.shareyourstory.org

An online support resource where families can connect and share the experience of having a premature infant.

Parent Trust for Washington Children

www.parenttrust.org

Parenting classes and local support groups, including classes just for fathers.

Some of the information in this handout was adapted from:

"Getting in Shape After Your Baby Is Born" by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

"Tips to Manage Anxiety and Stress" by Anxiety Disorders Association of America

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have question or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Maternal and Infant Care Clinic: 206-598-4070