The Father's Role During Pregnancy

A father has an important role during their partners pregnancy, labor, delivery and afterward. It is important to help and support your partner through this new period. There are many physical and emotional changes that happen. To be helpful and supportive during this time, you should know and understand what is happening to your partner during the pregnancy, labor, delivery and postpartum period.

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy lasts 40 weeks (plus or minus 2 weeks). The pregnancy is divided into three trimesters.

- In the first 13 weeks, the mother feels tired, has painful breasts, may feel sick to her stomach (*nauseated*), throw up (*vomit*), urinates more often and may have mood changes. All of these changes are normal. If the father is aware of these, he can be more helpful, supportive and understanding. This may include helping with household duties and activities and spending more time with each other.
- In the next 14 to 28 weeks, your partner is over the tiredness, nausea and vomiting. She will likely feel better and more energetic. This is the best time of the pregnancy to be more active together, go out more often or take trips. You will be able to see her belly popping out with the pregnancy. You may be able to feel the baby kick.
- In the last 12 weeks, she may become more uncomfortable again because her abdomen is popping out more as the baby grows. She may have a hard time doing household chores, her balance may be off, she may have a hard time bending over, tires easily and has a tough time sleeping. At this time, you will realize the birth of your baby is close. You and your partner may have concerns about the safety of your partner and if the baby will be normal and healthy. These are all normal and natural feelings. You should talk with each other and your caregiver if you have any questions.

Attend prenatal care visits with your partner. This is a good time for you to get to know your caregiver, follow the pregnancy and ask questions. Prenatal visits are once a month for 6 months, then they are every 2 weeks for 2 months and then once a week the last month. You may have more prenatal visits if your caregiver feels it is needed. Your caregiver usually does an ultrasound of the baby at one of the prenatal visits or more often if needed. It is an exciting and emotional to see the baby moving and the heart beating.

Fathers can experience emotional changes during this time as well. These emotions can include happiness, excitement and feeling proud. Fathers may also be concerned about having new responsibilities. These include financial, educational and if it will change the relationship with his partner. These feelings are normal. They should be talked about openly and positively with each other.

An important and often asked question is if sexual intercourse is safe during pregnancy and if it will harm the baby. Sexual intercourse is safe unless there is a problem with the pregnancy and your caregiver advises you to not have sexual intercourse. Because physical and emotional changes happen in pregnancy, your partner may not want to have sex during certain times. This is mostly true in the first and third trimesters. Trying different positions may make sexual intercourse comfortable. It is important for the both of you to discuss your feelings and desires with this problem. Talk to your caregiver about any questions you have about sexual intercourse during the pregnancy.

LABOR AND DELIVERY

There are childbirth classes available for couples to take together. They help you understand what happens during labor and delivery. They also teach you how to help your partner with her labor pains, how to relax, breath properly during a contraction and focus on what is happening during labor. You may be asked to time the contractions, massage her back and breath with her during the contractions. You are also there to see and enjoy the excitement your baby being born. If you have any feelings of fainting or are uncomfortable, tell someone to help you. You may be asked to leave the room if a problem develops during the labor or delivery.

Sometimes a Cesarean Section (*C-section*) is scheduled or is an emergency during labor and delivery. A C-section is a major operation to deliver the baby. It is done through an incision in the abdomen and uterus. Your partner will be given a medicine to make her sleep (*general anesthesia*) or *spinal anesthesia* (numbing the body from the waist down). Most hospitals allow the father in the room for a C-section unless it is an emergency. Recovery from a C-section takes longer, is more uncomfortable and will require more help from the father.

AFTER DELIVERY

After the baby is born, the mother goes through many changes again. These changes could last 4 to 6 weeks or longer following a C-section. It is not unusual to be anxious, concerned and afraid that you may not be taking care of your newborn baby properly. Your partner may take a while to regain her strength. She may also get feelings of sadness (*postpartum blues or depression*), which is a more serious condition that may require medical treatment.

Your partner may decide to breastfeed the baby. This helps with bonding between the mother and the baby. Breastfeeding is the best way to feed the baby, but you may feel "left out." However, you can feel included by burping the baby and bottle feeding the baby with breast milk (collected by the mother) to give your partner some rest. This also helps you to bond with the baby. Breastfeeding mothers can get pregnant even if they are not having menstrual periods. Therefore, some form of birth control should be used if you do not want to get pregnant.

Another question and concern is when it is safe to have sexual intercourse again. Usually it takes 4 to 6 weeks for healing to be over with. It may take longer after a C-section. If you have any questions about having sexual intercourse or if it is painful, talk to your caregiver.

As a father, you will be adjusting your role as the baby grows. Fatherhood is a on-going learning experience. You and your partner should still make time to be together alone and be the couple you were before the baby was born. This is helpful for you, your partner and your baby. As you can see, it is important for a father to be helpful, understanding and supportive during this special time.

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