

PREVENTING FATIGUE AND EXHAUSTION

For most mothers the first weeks at home with a new baby are often the hardest in their lives. You will probably feel overworked, even overwhelmed. Inadequate sleep will leave you fatigued. Caring for a baby can be a lonely and stressful responsibility. You may wonder if you will ever catch up on your rest or work. The solution lies in asking for help. No one should be expected to care for a young baby alone.

Every baby awakens one or more times each night. The way to avoid sleep deprivation is to know the total amount of sleep you need per day and to get that sleep in bits and pieces. Go to bed earlier in the evening. When your baby naps you must also nap. Your baby doesn't need you hovering while he sleeps. If sick, your baby will show symptoms. While you are napping take the telephone off the hook and put up a sign on the door saying "Mother and baby sleeping." If your total sleep remains inadequate hire a babysitter or bring in a relative. If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to take care of your baby.

THE POSTPARTUM BLUES

More than 50% of women experiences postpartum blues on the third or fourth day after delivery. The symptoms include tearfulness, tiredness, sadness, and difficulty in thinking clearly. The main cause of this temporary reaction is probably the sudden decrease of maternal hormones. Since the symptoms commonly begin on the day the mother comes home from the hospital, the full impact of being totally responsible for a dependent newborn may also be a contributing factor. Many

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mothers feel let down and guilty about these symptoms because they have been led to believe they should be overjoyed about caring for their newborn. In any event, these symptoms usually clear in 1 to 3 weeks as hormone levels return to normal and the mother develops routines and a sense of control over her life.

There are several ways to cope with the postpartum blues. First, acknowledge your feelings. Discuss them with your husband or a close friend. Also discuss your sense of being trapped and your feeling that these new responsibilities are insurmountable. Don't feel you need to suppress crying or put on a "super mom show" for everyone. Second, get adequate rest. Third, mix with other people, don't become isolated. Get out of the house at least once a week-go to the hairdresser, go shopping, visit a friend, or see a movie. By the third week, setting aside an evening each week for a "date" with your husband is also helpful. If you don't feel better by the time your baby is 1 month old, see your physician about the possibility of needing counseling for depression.

HELPERS: RELATIVES, FRIENDS SITTERS

As already emphasized, everyone needs extra help during the first few weeks alone with a new baby. Ideally, you were able to make arrangements for help before your baby was born. The best person to help (if you get along with her) is usually your mother or mother-in-law. If not, teenagers or adults can come in several times per week to help with housework or look after your baby while you go out or get a nap. If you have other young children, you will need daily help. Clarify that your role is

looking after your baby. Your helper's role is to shop, cook, houseclean, and wash clothes and dishes. If your newborn has a medical problem that requires special care, ask for home visits by a community health nurse.

THE FATHER'S ROLE

The father needs to take time off from work to be with his wife during labor and delivery, as well as on the day she and her child came home from the hospital. If the couple has a relative who will temporarily live in and help, the father can continue to work after the baby comes home. However, when the relative leaves, the father can take saved up vacation time as paternity leave. At a minimum he needs to work shorter hours until his wife and baby have settled in.

The age of noninvolvement of the father is over. Not only does the mother need the father to help her with household chores, but also the baby needs to develop a close relationship with the father. Today's father helps with feeding, changing diapers, bathing, putting to bed, reading stories, dressing, disciplining, homework, playing games, and calling the physician when the child is sick.

A father may avoid interacting with his baby during the first year of life because he is afraid he will hurt the baby or he won't be able to calm the child when the baby cries. The longer a father goes without learning parenting skills, the harder it becomes to master them. At a minimum, a father should hold and comfort his baby at least once each day.

VISITORS

Only close friends and relatives should visit you during the first months at home. They should not visit if they are sick. To prevent unannounced visitors,

the parent can put up a sign saying "Mother and baby sleeping. No visitors. Please call first." Friends without children may not understand your needs. During visits the visitor should pay special attention to older siblings.

REELING YOUR BABY: ACHIEVING WEIGHT GAIN

Your main assignments during the early months of life are loving and feeding your baby. All babies lose a few ounces during the first few days after birth. However, they should never lose more than 7% of their birth weight (usually about 8 ounces). Most bottle-fed babies are back to birth weight by 10 days of age and breast-fed babies by 14 days of age.