

10 Things Every Mom-to-Be Should Know: What they don't tell you about labor and the days following delivery

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You've read all the books, attended childbirth classes, subscribed to the magazines, and talked to your friends and family about their experiences. The thing is, no one tells you what you really need to know. For instance, everyone's experience is different! So, don't let that lady in the grocery store telling you her horror stories freak you out. In the same vein, you'll be able to pull some useful information from the following list, but not everything will apply to your situation. Just take some of those deep, diaphragmatic breaths and read on!

1. It's messy, messy, messy! Do you envision the birth of your child just like it happens on TV? Wearing full makeup, you'll do a lot of huffing and puffing, maybe say something nasty to your husband, and out pops your baby. Guess again. I'll spare you by not going into too much detail, but imagine fluids exploding from every orifice of your body at the same time!
2. Don't wear your own nightgown. How many articles advise you to wear your own nightshirt? Some childbirth instructors stress this as one of the most important aspects of the birthing experience: "You shouldn't feel like property of the hospital," they say. See #1 above! Hopefully the nurse on duty will persuade you to wear a hospital gown. Although not glamorous, at least it's soft and practical.
3. Consider having more than one support person. Some people won't feel comfortable with this option, but it worked great for me. My husband, mother, and sister were all there to help me through labor. It allowed my husband to take breaks and I needed all three when it came time to push. I had my husband holding one leg, my sister clamped onto the other, and my mom rooting me on over the doctor's shoulder.
4. You'll know when it starts! Trying to figure out when labor actually started was the hardest thing about being a first-time mom. I had no idea how I was supposed to know if this was the "real" thing or only Braxton-Hicks contractions. Guess what? You'll know! It will hurt more and the contractions will come at regular intervals for a longer period of time.
5. Don't bring flowers, bring food! After living on ice chips and slushies for almost 36 hours and feeling like I'd run a marathon, all I wanted was food. Hospital food didn't cut it either! My menus somehow got switched with the mommy next door and her tastes were the polar-opposite of mine. In my foggy state, it took me two meals to figure this out and, by then, I was almost checked out of the hospital. My sister-in-law was a lifesaver when she thought to bring me a steaming-hot chicken pot pie, a plate of mashed potatoes, and berry cobbler from my favorite restaurant. My hero!

6. Rules for baby--wash your hands and no kissing! It's probably one of the hardest things to ask of your family members, but it will save you the ordeal of a sick baby. I knew to ask everyone to wash his or her hands. I'd heard it from veteran moms and the pediatrician. My son was born in December, smack in the middle of flu season. I felt very proud of myself for monitoring everyone's hand-washing until I found my son showered with wet kisses. Ugh! Now what? I changed the rules to include the "no kissing" clause.

7. Have someone at home to do chores. Even if you can't stand your mother-in-law, if she's the only one available to do the housework, laundry, and cooking while you learn the ropes of parenthood--take advantage of her offer. If you don't have a family member to count on, it's worth shelling out some cash to have someone come to your home for the waking hours of the first week. You'll need the time to adjust to your baby's schedule.

8. Keep a journal from Day One. Even if you're not a writer, just scribble down a few thoughts every day. The world will seem so upside-down, you can't remember your name. You'll want to remember some of the cute little things that happen. I think I treasure my journal more than the baby book or photo albums. It holds memories that would be quickly forgotten had I not recorded them in a journal.

9. Beginning breastfeeding hurts, but it's worth it. Nobody told me that! I just thought I'd be a human bottle. My breasts hold the milk and the baby drinks it. Well, it's not quite that simple. You will feel sore and swollen for the first few weeks. Lanolin on your nipples will be the only thing that gets you through it. You will get into a rhythm eventually, but you'll still have to deal with leaking and other wonders of breastfeeding. Just wait until the baby gets teeth! Remember, you're burning a ton of extra calories and your baby is benefiting immensely from every drop he drinks.

10. You're doing everything right. There are very few wrong ways to parent in the days after you bring your baby home. Of course, everyone will have advice, but you will know your baby better than anyone. Let him set his schedule and take some time to cue into his natural rhythms. Don't stress, just let it all happen.