

# Fourth Trimester Podcast

## Episode 3: Covering the Basics of the First Few Weeks After Birth

**Sarah Trott:** [00:00:05] My name is Sarah Trott. I'm a new mama to a baby girl and this podcast is all about postpartum care for the few months following birth, the time period also known as the Fourth Trimester. My postpartum doula, Esther Gallagher, is my co-host. She's a mother, grandmother, perinatal educator, birth and postpartum care provider. I've benefitted hugely from her support. All parents can benefit from the wisdom and support that a postpartum Doula provides. Fourth trimester care is about the practical, emotional and social support parents and baby require, and importantly, helps set the tone for the lifelong journey of parenting.

When I first became pregnant, I had never heard of postpartum Doulas, let alone knew what they did. So much of the training and preparation that expecting parents do is focused on the birth and newborn care. Once baby is born, often the first interaction parents have with medical or child professionals, other than the first pediatrician visits, is the six-week checkup with the OB/GYN. *What about caring for mama and family between the birth and the six week doctor visit? What are the strategies for taking care of the partner and the rest of the family while looking after your newborn?*

Our podcasts contain expert interviews with specialists from many fields to cover topics including postpartum doula practices, prenatal care, prenatal and postnatal yoga, parenting, breastfeeding, physical recovery from birth, nutrition, newborn care, midwifery, negotiating family visitation, and many more.

First-hand experience is shared through lots of stories from both new and seasoned parents. Hear what other parents are asking and what they have done in their own lives.

We reference other podcasts, internet resources and real-life experts who can help you on your own parenting journey. Visit us at <http://fourthtrimesterpodcast.com>

**Sarah Trott:** [00:01:17] Hi Esther.

**esther gallagher:** [00:01:18] Hi Sarah. Great to be talking with you again as always. Yes.

**Sarah Trott:** [00:01:24] One thing that would be great for us to talk about today would be what is it like the first few weeks post birth. Is there an overview of advice that you could give us, as if I were a brand new mom?

**esther gallagher:** [00:01:38] Yeah definitely. It's the thing that I talk about prenatally as often as I get an opportunity to do so. And I think it's the thing that so often parents aren't hearing about and then finding themselves in the midst of it very concerned. I wanted to start by just letting people know that there's a way to contact me. Should you ever have a comment or a query about anything you hear about on the podcast or want to suggest a topic for the podcast and the best way to get hold of me is via my Website email which is [placentaeg@gmail.com](mailto:placentaeg@gmail.com) Feel free to get in touch with me anytime you'd like to tell me anything that's on your mind. I won't promise to get back to you but I'll do my best. All right. Well today I thought I would talk about the basics of in-home postpartum care in the first few weeks once your baby has arrived. It's my opinion and it's my professional experience that the best time to have skilled postpartum care is as soon as possible after you've had your baby. And certainly the first two weeks after you've given birth or your bab[ies] arrived, in any case, are usually the most fraught, chaotic, exciting of your new life as a parent. There's just so much going on that that's when it really helps to have that person at your side and at the end of a phone should you need them, just supporting and guiding you from one day to the next as your body and your mind and your baby are going through such dramatic changes. So that doesn't mean that you wouldn't need ongoing support past the first two weeks. We call this the fourth trimester-- trimester means 3 months-- so it doesn't even mean that you wouldn't need support beyond the first 3 months. Absolutely. Being a new parent is a really wonderful and intensive project. But what I want to speak to today primarily is the fact that the first two weeks are the two weeks that get you started into this fourth trimester. In the case of a birth mother, she's going through some very profound physiological change which affects the social emotional changes she's also going through and vice versa. So if we start with that as a fact, but also kind of a metaphor for anybody

experiencing new parenting, then I think we have a lot to go on and a lot that we can keep in mind. So when I talk with parents-to-be about what's going to be up for them, I like to resolve everything down to the three most basic practical guides and so what I tell about- to-be-new-parents is I want you to start thinking about, in terms of: eating when the baby eats and babies eat often; sleeping when the baby sleeps and babies sleep often; and attending to your personal hygiene needs, if you're for instance the new mom, while your baby is tended to for their personal hygiene needs. And I think also, especially in those first two weeks, in terms of the fact that you're going to have needs for physical care as you heal and recover and establish breastfeeding, your body will be going through some profound changes that require good nutrition and plenty of rest. The first two weeks is not the time to set your sights on getting out of the house, getting back in shape, visiting -visiting -visiting, etc etc. etc.. It's time to see to your own needs for healing and recovering after having given birth. It's also, simultaneously, the time that your new baby needs full-on attendance. You're getting to know this new person now that they're on the outside; you're getting to understand their physical, emotional and social needs and how to take care of those. And all of this is in the mix. If you've set your sights on getting out and about then you may miss out on some of these things. Not only that you may compromise your healing and recovery. So it's time to really take things very slowly. And keep it simple. So I'm going to repeat that: eat when the baby eats; sleep when the baby sleeps; and take care of your personal hygiene needs: teeth brushing, going to the bathroom etc., for when your baby is also being attended in the poopy diaper diaper changing burping changing clothes etc.. So why would I resolve this down to such simple guides. Well. Here's the thing: your baby isn't going to sleep eight hours a night. Your baby's likely to be expressing their needs more often and maybe more dramatically at night especially in the first week or two. So if you're saving up for a good night's sleep you're likely to be very disappointed and potentially very frustrated as well as sleep deprived. It's very very important that you sleep in those short bursts that your baby's going to sleep. Babies don't sleep for long periods. How long do they sleep? Well, they might sleep anywhere from five minutes to five hours. But more likely it's going to be down in the 1 to 2 hour range. How many times a day do they do that? Well, they may do that 10 or 12 times a day. So if you had taken advantage of each time that your baby slept you would likely get a good, restorative, healing amount of sleep in a 24 hour period. So it's important that, at the very least, those of you folks who say you can't sleep during the day, at the very least that you lie down with no devices in the room turned on, and close your eyes and relax, so that your

body can have a chance to rest and restore and recover. Since this is going to be very important to you, this is why I point backwards to eating when the baby eats. Well, how often a day do babies eat? Well, they eat about 12 times a day. Some of those are relatively short periods and some of those are what we call cluster feeds where your baby's going to come to the breast very often. Maybe take a cat nap, wake up look like they're starving, drain the next breast, perhaps, wake up, say "Hey boy, I could really use some dessert!" and want to go back to the first breast and nurse for 10 to 15 minutes for some hind milk--we'll talk about later-- and take a cat nap and wake up again and 10 to 15 minutes on the 1st/ 2nd breast and back and forth and back and forth for a couple of hours, easily two, often more than that, often 3 hour stretches twice a day: the wee hours of the morning and the early-to-late evening babies will cluster feed. So if you aren't eating when your baby eats chances are you're going to be hungry. You may not know that you're hungry because with all the other physiological changes of postpartum, a lot of new moms and new parents in general tend to be so distracted by baby's needs that they simply forget or don't find time to prepare meals or they're preparing meals while their baby's sleeping. That's a no no. Or they just don't feel hungry. I'm often coaching partners when they come into the room and ask their new mom partner, "Hey, what do you want to eat?" I say, "Oh, she might not know, but she's going to be hungry. So why don't you whip something really nourishing up and let's see if she eats it?" and I guarantee whatever they whip up will be gone. So we'll talk about what appropriate nutrition for postpartum looks like later, but wrap your minds around the fact that you're going to be able to eat easily accessible nutrient dense foods, every time your baby comes to the breast. It might be that you just pop six or seven bites into your mouth and chew them up and swallow them and that's all you get around to. But those are going to be the six or seven bites that allow you to rest and sleep when your baby sleeps and not lie there wondering why you're so wakeful. And the reason you're so wakeful is if you're not getting enough calories your body knows it and it's on alert to go out and hunt and gather those calories. So this is why it's going to be important to plan for somebody who really knows what they're doing to arrange excellent meals and snack trays for you in the postpartum period. So that food is always available in an appropriate form. So that you can eat when your baby eats. I think the hygiene issue kind of follows pretty readily. You know that baby's going to need changing and burping and that might take anywhere from five to 15 minutes. Some babies take a lot more burping, but generally speaking newborns aren't going to put up with 15 minutes of walking around getting their backs patted if what's really going on for

them is they're hungry again or they're sleepy and ready to go to sleep. So the trick there is that in addition to the occasional toothbrushing and face washing and maybe a washcloth to the armpits and the nether regions occasionally, you're also going to want that nice shower or if you have somebody to clean your bathtub and prepare the herbs and do a good job of preparing a sitzbath for you at the opportune moment then a nice 20 minutes soak in a healing sitzbath will be a really great experience and a really healing thing to do. Now, you want to plan for that not necessarily when your baby's sleeping. There's no reason why you can't have a sitzbath while your baby's having to breastfeed if you have a talented person to support you in accomplishing that. So those are things that I want you to be thinking about in preparation for the fourth trimester and fold that into your contemplating: who is it that you would like to have show up in your life after your baby has arrived to help you with these needs? Now I'm going to circle back to the sleep when the baby sleeps thing, because when we have visitors, too often we feel that it's our job to entertain them and way too often they imagine that when the baby's sleeping it's a great time to visit because you're not busy feeding the baby or taking care of the baby. Well unfortunately, while that seems all too logical, it is of course sadly incorrect and it can really lead to parents having a very very difficult time because they become progressively more sleep deprived. Alternatively, people ask parents and other relatives and friends to show up for visits and those are people who have no idea of how to actually care for and support brand new parents. So it's all fun while their visiting is happening but it starts to crumble when parents start to crumble themselves for lack of enough nutrition and rest. So it's very important that you pick your visitors based on their capacity to recognize a sleeping baby when they see one and encourage you to take that opportunity to sleep with no questions asked and they can make their way to the kitchen and produce a beautiful nourishing snack tray for you for when you next wake up and are ready for the next breastfeed. Now, the other needs you're going to have are social and emotional in nature. And when I say social I just mean interacting with other people. It doesn't mean entertainment needs, it doesn't mean getting out into the world. It means that you feel connected to people that you love and care about and who love and care about you, who can show up for you appropriately at that time. Which is also going to go a long way in terms of meeting your emotional needs. Now your emotional needs are very much calibrated around your baby's needs, physical and otherwise, and your healing and recovery needs. So it's important to have an inkling of the fact that your hormones will be going through dramatic changes, particularly on day 3, 4 and 5. The first couple of days after giving

birth your hormones are loaded up on the end of endorphins and oxytocin, typically, and so you feel pretty great. In fact a lot of moms can't believe how good they feel and they imagine that that means they're going to get right back at it within a day or three. The fact of the matter is, that's happening so that you can get yourself where you need to go in order to be safe when everything else sets in. When the milk comes in; when the endorphins wear off; when everything starts to hurt more; when you haven't had enough sleep for a couple of days; then you kind of hit the bed and you stay there for the next couple of weeks. So that initial high makes you kind of hyper-alert. A lot of parents don't sleep well in the first 24 to 48 hours unless they're absolutely undisturbed and can actually sleep during the long initial period in the first 24 hours when their newborn actually has a long restorative sleep. If you miss out on that then you really miss out because it's not going to come again for a very long time. Babies do sleep a nice long four to six hour stretch some time in the first 24 hours after being born. So if you can engineer your life so that you're going to actually do that yourselves, you're ahead of the game. Most parents don't experience that. They're actually behind the game, especially once they've gotten home from the hospital and that's usually day three. And that's the day when the estrogen levels go in the toilet. The progesterone levels go in the toilet. There's no longer a placenta to support that hormonal high and so generally, you're going to experience a real dramatic shift and this is also going to be right around the time when your milk comes in and that means your body is going to be changing very dramatically particularly your breasts. It may be somewhat painful for 48 hours or so. It's really a normal thing to become engorged. And the best thing you could be doing for that engorgement is to breast feed your baby. And this is why I say to parents again and again: What's good for you is what's good for your baby and what's good for your baby is what's good for you. And that means that if your breasts are filling up and your baby's sleeping away you get to wake that baby up and coax them to the breasts and see if they won't help you with that engorgement before it gets out of hand. And that means that when your baby wakes up and is hungry you put them right to the breast and you give them a good thorough feed and you don't imagine that they're full yet. You just keep going as long as they're willing to go and you burp them and you try again and again and again until they're so milk drunk that you can't get them to take any more. That's good for you and that's good for your baby and that helps fend off jaundice that helps fend off engorgement that helps your uterus contract and come back down to its normal size in a timely fashion and it helps forestall any excessive bleeding. All of these things are very important for you and your baby. So eat when your baby eats. Sleep

when your baby sleeps. Brush your teeth and wash your armpits when your baby is having a diaper change and a burping. Have someone around who can really support you emotionally and really understands the changes you're going through and are going to be going through and somebody who supports you in getting enough rest and nutrition, whoever that is. And who isn't going to bring emotional strife into your love nest, of any kind at all. This is a time for you to really be able to enjoy as much of this experience as is accessible to you and to not have distractions that are unnecessary, disruptive or distressing.

**Sarah Trott:** [00:21:03] Thank you so much for that overview. I have a few more questions that would be helpful for clarifying some of the details of that overview if that's okay. Wonderful. So the first one is something basic. Some people may know what this is but some people may not. So what is a sitzbath?

**esther gallagher:** [00:21:23] Ok well I'm going to start by telling you what a sitzbath isn't and sitzbath isn't that crazy little plastic device that they send you home from the hospital with or that your friends tell you you should get a you order online. And it's the same devices they would have sent you home from the hospital with, that goes over the toilet, and are supposed to fill with warm water and sit in them. Technically that is a sitzbath but I find that it really isn't the best ticket for really helping heal and soothe your perineum and vulva after you've given birth, vaginally. A really great sitzbath is one where a knowledgeable person has put together a combination of herbs that's going to be really healing and supportive of the healing process and has stewed them up on your stove for you. You're not doing this for yourself. They've gone to the trouble of really scrubbing out your bath tub and rinsing it thoroughly. Then they're going to strain those herbs when the herbs are nicely steeped into your plugged bathtub and add nice warm water to a certain level that's not going to go above your pubic bone and then you're going to sit in your tub relaxing for 20 minutes and enjoying a hopefully peaceful 20 minutes of just soaking and soothing and allowing your vulva and perineum to be cleansed and soothed. And that's a sitzbath. It's not something I want new moms preparing for themselves because I want them to be resting and recovering and that's why I do it for new moms who have given birth vaginally.

**Sarah Trott:** [00:23:23] Do you have any special tips or tricks for parents who are on their own with the new baby? Like a single mom or anyone else who finds themselves

on their own at home with the baby. In other words would you alter your advice for someone in that situation?

**esther gallagher:** [00:23:38] Well the first thing I would say is: if it's in any way economically feasible be sure that you have a good well-trained postpartum doula coming in to support you even if it's just for a few hours a day. If you're sort of past the point where you need the level of care of highly trained postpartum doula perhaps somebody that we call a mother's helper who comes in and just gives you some support, makes you a sandwich for lunch, maybe throws on a pot of stew so that you can have some healthy meals, is a good baby care person so that if you need that hour or two or even three to gather yourself together in any way, whether it's take a nap, get a shower, whatever you know, respond to an e-mail or to interface with work that you have that support. But in the first two weeks if you're a single mother you do need some good care in your home so you can heal and recover. So looking to that friend who can make themselves fully available. Didn't just say they would love to help but really is able to help, has a schedule that's fully open in reasonable ways and that you can call upon. Isn't just going to show up to visit but is really going to be task oriented on your behalf. That's going to be the minimum that you're going to need in the first two to six week. Somebody who can run your errands for you. Somebody who will prepare meals and snacks for you and somebody who can you know burp and change a baby so that you can get to the bathroom. That's the bare minimum while you're healing and recovering.

**Sarah Trott:** [00:25:36] You can find out more about Esther Gallagher on <http://www.esthergallagher.com/>. You can also subscribe to this podcast in order to hear more from us. [Click here for iTunes](#) and [click here for Google Play](#). Thank you for listening everyone and I hope you'll join us next time on the Fourth Trimester. The theme music on this podcast was created by Sean Trott. Hear more at <https://soundcloud.com/seantrott>. Special thanks to my true loves: my husband Ben, daughter Penelope, and baby girl Evelyn. Don't forget to share the Fourth Trimester Podcast with any new and expecting parents. I'm Sarah Trott. Goodbye for now.