

Fourth Trimester Podcast

Episode 97: What is Postpartum? What is a Doula?

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 benefited 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 a 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: [00:00:43] Hi, this is Sarah Trott with Fourth Trimester Podcast. Esther is not with us today. We miss her dearly. But she'll be back again soon for another episode, I promise. I'm here with Leah Keller, who is our special guest today, and I'll introduce her in a moment.

Sarah Trott: [00:00:56] Today's topic is really cool. It's about how to prepare your body for giving birth with confidence. We are going to dive into a ton of details around this, like minimizing risk as much as possible, whether there are ways to make birth easier or faster, programs that people can participate in, exercise they can do at home to make this easier and more. So I'm really excited about that topic.

Sarah Trott: [00:01:18] Please go to Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcast, and hit subscribe so you can be alerted of any new episode as it's released. You can also go to our website which is fourthtrimesterpodcast.com, and subscribe to our newsletter, so please do that as well. And now Leah, welcome to the show.

Leah Keller: [00:01:36] Oh thank you Sarah.

Sarah Trott: [00:01:37] Yeah, I am going to give you a little bit of an intro here. So you are a personal trainer and you've created Every Mother, which is an online therapeutic exercise program. It's been endorsed by medical professionals and birth professionals. And really what you've been focused on is helping women exercise safely during pregnancy as well as after giving birth, helping them restore their strength, restore their function, recover from injury. You have a master's in English. You have a bachelor's in psychology. You've been featured on NPR and Good Morning America, and you live with your husband and your kids in San Francisco. Welcome to the show. We're so glad to have you here.

Leah Keller: [00:02:17] Oh, thank you so much. I'm really glad to be here.

Sarah Trott: [00:02:19] We would love to talk a little bit more about your own Fourth Trimester experience, which is something that we discussed when we were doing some

prep for the show, and it was really beautiful what you shared. Would you be willing to share some of your story?

Leah Keller: [00:02:32] Yeah, sure. So as you just summarized so well, my work since 2008 has really been around helping support women and birthing people during pregnancy and after pregnancy with exercise that is proven to help improve birth outcomes and also restore and rebuild the body postnatally. I was doing this before my daughter was born. She was born in 2013. I was passionate about it, both because I was helping my clients and wanting to help them in New York, but also wanting to gather this information for myself so that when I had the privilege of being pregnant and giving birth, I could do that with full awareness of how to prepare my body and how to do that with strength and confidence.

Leah Keller: [00:03:19] So when I went into the birth experience with my daughter, I had already been counseling clients for years about how to prepare for birth. And that all was true in my experience, in terms of strengthening the push muscles and training the pelvic floor to relax and open. And we can talk more about that in a second. But, and I would tell my clients, too, that the estimated workload of labor is like running 12 miles. I mean, it's sort of like just something to wrap your head around. Like, this is a hard physical act, right? To give birth. It's not like it just happens.

Leah Keller: [00:03:52] So your body is laboring literally to birth the child. And even though I knew theoretically this should be hard I didn't realize until I experienced it in my own body just how hard it was. And I had a really positive birth, very empowered birth, at the hospital without an epidural. Like in terms of what I was hoping for, all of those hopes were realized. So I feel very lucky in that way.

Leah Keller: [00:04:18] And yet still I was like, this was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life. And I had run a couple marathons by that point I had done a lot of hard things physically, and I was just floored with how much just that demanded of me physically. And I thought, now I am a person who's pretty much been training for birth for five years. Since I started to train my clients, I would always do what I was also having my clients do.

Leah Keller: [00:04:44] So I've kind of been training for this, preparing my body physically for five years, and had this awareness of like how to activate the muscles, how to relax the muscles, how do I want to coordinate this and like practicing that. So to still have had just been blown away by the challenge of it. I was like, I cannot imagine what women go through if they don't have this physical preparation.

Leah Keller: [00:05:07] Like it's just unfathomable to me. And I was sitting there looking at my baby full of oxytocin and like the post-birth rush of all the feelings and all of the euphoria. And I was in love with her and thinking it is not okay for my daughter, who will probably someday give birth. Just the odds are high that someday she'll experience a birth. Like she must know everything I know in order to go through that experience. Like with knowledge and empowerment, and like to have her full power as she enters that experience. And anything less than that is unacceptable for, for her or for any other child or person who's ever going to grow up and grow into that experience.

Leah Keller: [00:05:46] So that gave me the added passion and perseverance to carry forward when running a business and creating videos and all the things that kind of like have come since then to try to get this message out to a lot more people have been challenging. I got to keep going because I can't leave anybody behind in terms of their life, everyone has a right to understand their bodies and understand how to. Experience the best possible birth that they can. So anyway, baby Rosalie has kept me going when it's felt insurmountable.

Sarah Trott: [00:06:20] So you were passionate before with your business and helping women and other people and families, and then having your own baby and having the experience of becoming a mother yourself personally. It sounds like it's just inspired you even further.

Leah Keller: [00:06:34] Yes, definitely. I mean, being a mother adds a lot more. Like suddenly my identity is shifted, my time is shifted, my sleep is shifted, everything is shifted. It's so much more demanding on you as a human, as you also know, but also my commitment to like, I can't let this go. Like even some days it's hard and kids are

sick or, you know, all the things that happen. It's like, well, gotta keep going because it's worth it. And people deserve this information. Yeah.

Sarah Trott: [00:07:01] And that information is so interesting, especially for our listeners who may be preparing for their first birth or a second or third birth or even more. And, you know, the questions top of mind are, how do I best prepare my body? And I'm really excited that you bring such a wealth of experience to this conversation around that.

Leah Keller: [00:07:20] Yeah, and there are a lot of published studies. And if you want to kind of review a summary of them for anybody who's really into like digging deep into the literature, ACOG The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists released their most recent statement on physical activity and exercise during pregnancy and postpartum in 2020, and they've updated a little bit since then. But that's the most recent full statement. And they summarize a lot of this research that I'm going to refer to.

Leah Keller: [00:07:46] But they currently recommend that all women who are having an uncomplicated pregnancy exercise during pregnancy, even if they were previously sedentary, because the benefits are so strong and the risks are so low. So I was just talking last week to a midwife, a local midwife, we were giving a little talk together and she was saying to the people in the room that as a practitioner, the one thing she wants her patients to do is to commit to exercising.

Leah Keller: [00:08:15] Anything, even if it means take the stairs whenever you have the chance, take the stairs instead of the elevator, or park the car further. So you need to walk to the car. But like baby steps. But the more you can work physical activity into your life, the more you will enter birth with strength and stamina. And one of the biggest causes that can lead to a surgical intervention in birth, which has higher risk than a vaginal delivery or an uncomplicated vaginal delivery, is maternal exhaustion.

Leah Keller: [00:08:42] And it's just physical exhaustion. And that can really be improved when you enter birth training, having been active during that pregnancy. So you're not trying to do this hardest thing you maybe have ever done physically being

deconditioned and sort of like, well, I've exercised the least I ever have because I thought I should take it easy during the pregnancy. So while we want you to relax and take it easy, we also want you to balance that with good activity so that you do have that strength physically and that confidence mentally, that you can do it so you can avoid some interventions that might be avoidable.

Leah Keller: [00:09:15] So anyway, what are my recommendations for exercise during pregnancy? Well in broad strokes to do weight bearing activity. So swimming is also nice. Swimming feels great during pregnancy. So I'm not against swimming, but you get a little bit more bang for your buck if you just go for a walk outside every day. Like, that is a great starting place.

Leah Keller: [00:09:35] And if the weather isn't good where you are, you can walk on a treadmill. A little incline is nice. So if you're doing something cardiovascular, such as walking or biking or swimming or any activity like that, you do want it to be challenging enough that you can't sing an opera. So you shouldn't be able to sing while you're doing it, but you also don't want to be so breathless that you couldn't have a light conversation.

Leah Keller: [00:09:59] So, you know, go for a walk with a friend. That's a win-win. You get to talk and catch up with somebody and you can have a light conversation. So that tells you you're working hard, you're breathing heavily a little bit, but you can still talk. So that's a good way to gauge how hard you should be working. But, you know, having some cardio that's weight bearing in your life, if that's the only thing you can do. That is awesome. That is so awesome.

Leah Keller: [00:09:59] In our app, with Every Mother, we specialize in core and pelvic floor training for birth. So, as you can imagine, the abdominal muscles, the deep abdominal muscles are very actively involved in the pushing process and also in stabilizing and posture and preventing low back pain, which is so common during pregnancy and largely preventable if we can learn how to distribute the weight appropriately to the core.

Leah Keller: [00:10:49] And we also train the pelvic floor muscles both so that they have good, healthy, muscle tone. Because when the baby is coming out, if that muscle is toned, it is more elastic, like a rubber band than if it's very flaccid and weak. And so it's less likely to tear if you have a strong pelvic floor.

Leah Keller: [00:11:11] Now, when I say strong pelvic floor, some people are like, oh well, I don't want a kegel. I don't want to have too strong a muscle. I don't want to be tight. Right. So your body will expand, but you want to be able to engage the muscle fully. And this is true of all the muscles in your body. But right now we're talking about the pelvic floor. But you also need to practice. And we practice in our app and in our exercise videos how to relax fully and lengthen and release that pelvic floor muscle.

Leah Keller: [00:11:39] So you want to have a balance of some strength and some healthy tone in the muscle so that it has integrity when you go through the birth. But you also want to be able to consciously relax, open, and soften so that you're not getting in your own way when you're pushing the baby out.

Leah Keller: [00:11:56] One other analogy I like to give is a toothpaste tube. So when you're pushing during labor, yes, your uterus contracts on its own spontaneously, so you don't have to consciously contract the uterus, but you are pushing when it's to the final stage of labor, you are pushing the baby out physically with your push muscles. and you're largely wanting to push from the upper and middle abs so that you're kind of pushing the baby out down through the opening. And you don't want to keep the cap of the toothpaste tube on, so you don't want to squeeze the opening closed every time you push through the muscles of your deep core muscles.

Leah Keller: [00:12:32] So that's why it is important during the pregnancy to learn how to engage your deep core, your transverse abdominis, your obliques, while opening and releasing the pelvic floor. And at first you might feel kind of like it's like rubbing your belly and patting your head. It's like, wait, can I do this? Because those muscles kind of want to engage together. That's sort of a natural co-contraction of those muscles. But, you can practice this and get better and better. Even just within a few days of just focused attention to how you engage the deep core and relax and open the pelvic floor.

Leah Keller: [00:13:06] And we do have a free article about this, on our website that we will link to in the notes for this podcast. But it kind of goes through step by step how you can practice this daily with a little bit of evidence. So it's also a good strategy to kind of poop better for your body. And all of a sudden I'm talking about poop. Yeah. Just bring it on. But when we have a little bit of guidance from a musculoskeletal perspective and how we can poop in a safer way so we can avoid hemorrhoids and avoid some other sort of dysfunction, constipation, etc. during the pregnancy.

Leah Keller: [00:13:41] We can also improve our training and preparation and coordination of those deep core muscles for birth. So basically I coach women through how you can engage the muscles so that you're having a nice bowel movement while opening and relaxing the pelvic floor. And then you have evidence that you weren't tightening the sphincter with the pelvic floor muscles because you relaxed enough that there's solid, something solid pass through you and there's evidence in the toilet.

Leah Keller: [00:14:09] So I explain this more succinctly in the article and give you step by step how you can do this. But it's just reassuring to women, especially in the third trimester, when they're like, oh my God I have to get this baby out of me somehow. And like, what? What? Like, how does this baby that's this big going to squeeze out of my body? It's kind of terrifying. But it is. It is a natural process. And your body is powerful and resilient and it'll be great.

Leah Keller: [00:14:35] So anyway, it just kind of gives you that reassurance okay, I am relaxing those muscles and I am engaging the upper abdominal muscles. And this is, this is preparing me physically and mentally for, for birth. So you're not trying to learn a new muscle coordination like deep, almost invisible muscles while you're in labor, because that's not the best time to learn a new exercise.

Sarah Trott: [00:14:58] Yeah for sure. So exercise daily is something I'm hearing, even if it's just a walk and talk with a friend, which sounds like fun anyway, that sounds great. And then maybe some other gentle exercise. Obviously consult with your doctor if you have one, and make sure you're getting the correct advice that you need from a medical

standpoint. But in general. Yeah. So these core compressions sound like something that someone can do. Is there a certain point in pregnancy when someone should start thinking about starting this stuff, or is it from the moment you find out?

Leah Keller: [00:15:28] So that's a good question. So I would say the earlier the better. But it's also never too late. So we've had people who just found out about us and they're like, I have four weeks to go, is this still going to help me? And I'm like, absolutely, this will help you so that you have four weeks to prepare versus zero weeks to prepare.

Leah Keller: [00:15:45] I'd say a lot of people feel more energetic and more like they're ready to embrace an exercise program during the second trimester than they do during the first because of morning sickness and nausea and just fatigue. So, you know, don't you don't have to be hard on yourself and like, drag yourself if you're not ready. but usually people feel a lot better and have that energy burst in the second trimester. So I'd say if you're in your first trimester, you're like, oh my God, I can't think about doing that. That's okay. But the second trimester is really a good time to just start something like that.

Sarah Trott: [00:16:20] Yeah, that was definitely true for me. I was the most energetic right in that middle phase. And that's a great time to explore not only your physical fitness but all kinds of things. If you're thinking about preparing for your postpartum experience and what that can look like. We were also talking earlier about postpartum doula care. So I want to kind of just touch on that for a second, because you and I were having a really engaged conversation around it. And I think you said something like, it's not an option. Yeah, like it's non-negotiable or something like that. Having someone there to help.

Leah Keller: [00:16:52] Yes. I have two children, and with my first child, I had a labor and delivery doula who was great, but I didn't even really think about the postpartum. I'd probably heard about postpartum doula, but I think I thought I conflated it with a baby nurse who comes and takes care of the baby at the night time so you can sleep. So anyway, I just like I didn't really fully understand what that was. I was very lucky that my mom flew out to New York and helped out for a couple of weeks, and that was great.

Leah Keller: [00:17:23] But then as I approached the second childbirth and postpartum recovery, by then I had a much better idea of what a postpartum doula was, and I was like, I want that. Like, this time I'm getting a labor and delivery doula and a postpartum doula, and it's just so wonderful to have somebody there taking care of your needs. And we talked ahead of time - Esther was my doula, and she was wonderful - about our preferences, what do I need from her? How could she best support me? And, one of the best things that she did absolutely was snack plates, like ten snack plates a day.

Leah Keller: [00:17:58] And so I get up at three in the morning breastfeeding the baby, and I'm like, just like shoving in all this wonderful, rich, nourishing food. It was just like, I couldn't get enough. But anyway, to have somebody come and she came to support me during that early postpartum and prepared sitz baths and answered questions just where you're like, ah, I feel like I'm bleeding more than I should. What do you think?

Leah Keller: [00:18:20] And, you know, she would refer me to a doctor for a medical question, but just to have a sounding board of someone who's been around a lot of births, you know, and I also had support from my mom and a mother in law who came at various points. But sometimes it's like, you don't always want to share all those details, the messy details with a mother in law. But you do like it's like Esther is this normal? Is this okay? Like, what should I do? yeah.

Leah Keller: [00:18:45] So it's just great to have someone to lean on who really understands birth and postpartum recovery.

Leah Keller: [00:18:58] One one downside is a lot of women can't afford a doula, a postpartum doula, it's not covered by insurance. And so it's an out-of-pocket expense. And so if it's a little bit not something that's part of an option for you, hopefully there's other people in your network who can support you, whether it's a friend or a family member.

Leah Keller: [00:19:17] And we have a resource which is a blog article that Esther helped write that will give you tips about, well, if somebody is going to come and support

you, how can they best support you? Like what do you need? Talk ahead of time about your preferences and things that you're comfortable with or like that. Seems like they would be amazing for you so that you can just like, be the best help or your family members or support person can be the best help to you. because there's a lot of things you just don't think about. So if you're just like, I'll just show up and do whatever you want, well, sometimes the person who's early postpartum doesn't know what they want and that and they're kind of in a fog. And to have somebody who's just like they're dedicated to supporting you is just amazing. Absolutely.

Sarah Trott: [00:19:59] Couldn't agree more 100%. And there are things that your friends or family members or other people in your support network can do for you. so we'll share that article, that Leah you're just talking about as well as we have. and I think it links to the do's and don'ts of being a helpful visitor. It's kind of like a little checklist. It's easy. It's not a long read. You can even send it to someone who's thinking about coming and visiting an in-law or whoever it might be.

Sarah Trott: [00:20:28] So, okay, so circling back, you've got a program that's specific to birth prep, right? And it's based on the first trimester, second trimester, and third trimester. So it's got a lot of detailed specific information.

Leah Keller: [00:20:40] Yeah. So it's an exercise program. and the whole program follows ACOG guidelines. That's the same overseeing body of obstetricians and gynecologists that I referred to earlier. so everything is safe. Everything is endorsed by OBs and other birth professionals. but it's really a comprehensive exercise program that includes cardio, that includes strength training.

Leah Keller: [00:21:06] And our strength training is specifically designed to address the postural imbalances of pregnancy. So the breast becomes heavy. And plus we're already doing computer work and everything. So it's like there tends to be a tightening, and a contraction of the chest and front body muscles and a lengthening and weakening of the upper back muscles. So we have exercises that are designed specifically to help open the chest, and bring your posture into neutral.

Leah Keller: [00:21:36] Same with the core. often women are even afraid to engage their abdominal muscles. Like maybe they got the memo not to do crunches during pregnancy, which I agree with. Don't do crunches. Do other core stabilizing exercises. But we'll help kind of teach you how to safely engage your core muscles, your abdominal muscles, so that you can take the brunt off the back, because often there's that lordosis where the back just gets tighter and tighter. And there can be sciatica. And just like a lot of other things going on that really make can, can make you uncomfortable.

Leah Keller: [00:22:09] And just doing exercises to strengthen the body correctly and balance everything out does wonders to avoid those discomforts or to minimize those discomforts. So anyway, we offer cardio that's safe. We offer strength training that's very specific to pregnancy. and then we also offer everyday core and pelvic floor exercises that will help you find those muscles, connect to those muscles, feel acquainted with those muscles, and also strengthen them appropriately so that you're being safe for yourself, safe for baby, and preparing the core and pelvic floor for birth.

Sarah Trott: [00:22:46] Yeah.

Leah Keller: [00:22:47] And in terms of the trimester. So we do have an intro two weeks that is appropriate for all trimesters. So that's to help people understand the program, understand the core compressions, which is the foundational exercise that kind of permeates all of the things that we do.

Leah Keller: [00:23:05] And then you would choose a path after that based on your trimester and the trimester paths are mostly going to vary a little bit in like intensity of workout, frequency of workout, and everything that we actually do in all trimesters is safe for all trimesters. So it's not like, well, if you chose the second trimester, you're actually third trimester. You did the math wrong. You're not going to hurt yourself. There's no problem.

Leah Keller: [00:23:29] But, we really kind of designed those different trimester paths with the idea of, oh, early, early pregnancy. You're probably feeling crummy. You

probably don't have as much energy. We're going to do more restorative stuff, more invigorating light stuff. and maybe just less overall volume. And then as you get into the second trimester, that's kind of like the most vigorous, the most frequent workouts, etc., because we know this is when most people feel better. And then in the third trimester, we again start to start to taper and start to prepare you more specifically for birth. So, in terms of pelvic floor exercises and education, we're getting you more ready for that experience.

Sarah Trott: [00:24:12] Yeah. Amazing. And is there something in those courses that you would recommend, like if someone did one thing, across it all, it sounds like it's the core compressions.

Leah Keller: [00:24:25] I would say it's the core compressions. Yeah. and that is a healthy activation of your transverse abdominis, which is your deepest core muscle. and it coordinates with the breath and it coordinates with the pelvic floor. And it just kind of helps you optimally engage those deep core muscles and throughout your daily life too.

Leah Keller: [00:24:45] I feel like almost every woman I know has moved during at least one pregnancy, like moved to a new house, right or a new apartment or whatever. It's like there's all this nesting impulse. So I remember being shocked initially when I was training pregnant women. I'm like, every pregnant client is moving. Like, you have a lot going on. You have to move right now. But it's like they feel like they need another bedroom or they need whatever. So anyway, so, you know, there's packing boxes, there's like lifting.

Leah Keller: [00:25:14] There's, you know, trying to do things. And you might be somebody who's used to just doing everything for yourself. Well, yes, you can still lift, but you need to be really aware of how you use your body. And if it's really heavy or awkward, let somebody else get that. But, you know, if you're lifting a moderate box, like we have videos that show you, how do you do that safely, you bring the object towards you. So you're not like lifting way out, you know, like awkwardly like so you're kind of the physics of it make it more challenging than it needs to be.

Leah Keller: [00:25:40] So draw the object to you or the child. You might have an older child, right? You're lifting the toddler who maybe needs more comfort and more attention because the pregnancy is like making everything a little bit uncertain for that child. So anyway, bring the child or the object close to you and you're going to exhale. Shh. Exhale. Like with strength. Like you're forcefully exhaling. And that will engage your deep core. And it will also protect your pelvic floor so that you maybe don't leak urine when you make that effort of lifting the child or lifting the box. And so you don't bulge downward on the pelvic floor, which can be less desirable both for continence issues and for prolapse issues, etc..

Leah Keller: [00:26:20] So just like functional movement, we kind of teach you how to have healthy posture during pregnancy, how to move better, and how to just do things like lifting or, you know, maybe have a child where you need still in a car seat and you're trying to lift the heavy car seat like that's one of the hardest things.

Leah Keller: [00:26:33] Also, newborn, you have a newborn, maybe you just had a C-section and you have to get to your first pediatrician appointment and you're like, well, it's me and the baby. So I guess I'm putting the baby car seat in the car, you know? So how do you do that as safely as possible so that you can promote healing with all of those movements versus injure it.

Sarah Trott: [00:26:51] Great. There's so much you covered here. I really, really appreciate it. You have given us a code that listeners can use if they're interested in one of these programs that they can use for a discount. It's 10% off with code FOURTHTRIMESTER10. So you can use that and we'll have links on our website as well for that. So you can sign up if you're interested for any of these programs. I'm really happy that we covered all of this information. Thank you so much, Leah. I really appreciate the time.

Leah Keller: [00:27:18] Oh, thank you Sarah, it was such a pleasure.

Sarah Trott: 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 Podcasts](#). 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.