

Health advice for women at each stage of motherhood

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Everyone knows that on Mother's Day, Mom's needs come first. But the rest of the year, mothers often put their health care on hold to focus on others.

"A lot of times as women, we tend to put ourselves last," said Dr. Marlene Blaise, a cardiologist in independent practice in Alpharetta, Georgia.

Avoiding that is important for more than mothers themselves, said Jennifer Stuart, an epidemiologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston.

"It's also important for our families," said Stuart, who has a doctorate in epidemiology and focuses her research on adverse pregnancy outcomes and maternal cardiovascular disease risk. "As a parent, you're laying down a foundation and modeling behaviors, healthy or otherwise, for your children. So, if we're engaging in a healthy diet and physical activity, and our children are seeing and learning from that, they can benefit, too."

To help fellow mothers of all ages, Blaise and Stuart offered health advice for each stage of motherhood.

Before your baby is born

"It's important to head into a pregnancy in the best physical condition that you can," said Stuart, who is mother to a seven-month-old boy.

Pregnancy is like a [stress test](#) for the heart and its related functions, she said. Having a [healthy body weight](#), being physically active and eating a healthy diet "positions you to have the healthiest pregnancy, delivery and child or children that you can."

If your health isn't perfect, don't be discouraged, Stuart said. "Today is the best time to start thinking about health and motherhood, regardless of where you are in your life."

During pregnancy, it's crucial to pay attention to [health issues](#) that arise. Women often are told that if a problem resolves after giving birth, they don't need to worry about it, Stuart said. But such issues can be early signals about long-term health.

So, if you develop pregnancy-related diabetes or [high blood pressure](#), or deliver preterm, "make sure that you have a primary care provider who knows your pregnancy history," Stuart said. "These conditions, or what we call adverse pregnancy outcomes, are considered cardiovascular risk markers. Experiencing any of them during pregnancy means that you want to be more on top of going in for your annual physical exams and getting your [blood sugar](#), blood pressure and [cholesterol levels](#) checked in the years and decades after pregnancy."

That knowledge is empowering, she said. "Having that information about your future risk at the time of the pregnancy means having that information earlier in your life, when you have more time and are better able to improve your long-term health."

Moms of infants

"Being a new mom and recovering from a pregnancy, whether or not it was complicated, is hard work, and challenging, and overwhelming," Stuart said. "It's a season of life where I think, as women, we can forget or feel we don't have time to take care of ourselves."

Blaise, mother to a 4-year-old boy, said that from the start, "it's important to carve out that time for yourself to make sure that you do all of the follow-up appointments that you need to do."

Because "if you're not in good health—if you're not getting good sleep, if you're not eating right, if you don't have time to exercise—then everything else about that child becomes a lot more difficult," Blaise

said.

One key part, she said, is working as a team with your partner, setting schedules about who gets to sleep and when.

Mothers with younger kids

Teamwork remains the key as children age, Blaise said, especially if you're a working mom, juggling a job with child care and school.

Parents often hear, "it takes a village," she said. So don't hesitate to lean on friends and family or, if you can afford to, hire help. "Reach out to that village, and create that village for yourself."

Sticking to a schedule helps her cope with the long hours and obligations that come with being a physician. "I am an early-morning person," she said. "I get up early to exercise, because it's the only time that I have for myself."

A child's early years can be a good time to incorporate their health needs with your own, Stuart said. Feed everyone a [healthy diet](#). Get physically active as a family. "Being physically active is totally a win-win for the health of the children, of the family and the mother."

The teen years

As a child ages, it's important for moms to keep on track with routine checkups, Blaise said.

"I know a lot of times, it's really hard to squeeze that in," she said, but getting a physical and knowing your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol numbers will let you know what areas you may need zero in

on.

For women in their mid-40s, [breast cancer screening](#) with mammograms and colon cancer screening with colonoscopies or stool tests also join the [health care](#) to-do list, according to [recommendations](#) from the American Cancer Society.

After the kids become adults

As children age into adulthood, Stuart said, the burdens of being a parent might lighten, giving you time to prioritize yourself, "perhaps for the first time in 18-plus years."

As you do so, make sure your primary care doctor knows your pregnancy history. Many doctors know to ask about whether a woman has a history of preeclampsia, a dangerous increase in [blood pressure](#) that can happen late in pregnancy, "but there are some that don't," Stuart said.

Women also should talk to their adult daughters about their childbirth experiences, because some complications have genetic components. "For example, if your mom had preeclampsia, you are more likely to have preeclampsia in your own [pregnancy](#)," Stuart said.

Mothers with adult children might be of an age where they are dealing with menopause and related changes that can lead to weight gain or affect their [physical activity](#), Blaise said. "So it's a time to focus on diet and exercise—and, like I said, getting those screening exams."

Stuart emphasized that whatever the phase of life, it's important for a mother to seek help from her support network or outside groups if she needs it. "Be your own advocate and build a team that can support your needs," she said.

It's too easy for a mother to lose herself in all the things that she feels responsible for, Blaise said. "You always have to remember to take care of you," she said. "Because if you're doing well, then your family will do well."

Provided by American Heart Association

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