

How to Cope With a Complicated Pregnancy

Advice from a mother and physician who has been there

A doctor who cares for sick newborns, Wendy Kowalski, M.D., meets a lot of women with high-risk pregnancies and listens to their stories. She understands what they're going through, because she has her own story to share. Kowalski has had three complicated pregnancies and has been on bed rest to prevent pre-term labor. "My experience makes me a better physician," she says. "I can relate to parents and help them cope." Here is her advice to couples dealing with a stressful pregnancy:



- **Educate yourself.** Read about your or your baby's condition. Ask your doctor about reading materials. "Some couples are afraid to know what's going on, but it's important that you know what to expect," she says. "The experience still will be stressful, but if you educate yourself it will be a little less stressful."
- **Be your own advocate.** "Ask your doctor: What do I need? What does my baby need? Can I get all the services I need at this hospital? You must be your own advocate, because no one knows you and your baby better than you," Kowalski says.
- **Don't hesitate to ask questions.** "If you need to ask the same question 10 times, that's fine—doctors expect that. They know this is new to you. All your questions are valid and appropriate."
- **Understand your test results.** "Doctors are willing to show you the results of your X-rays, lab tests and ultrasounds, so take advantage of that."
- **Tell the doctor everything about yourself.** "Even if you think it's minor, bring it up anyway. Whether it's a special diet you're on, herbal medications you're taking, a trip you plan on, a change in your body...let the doctor decide whether it's important or unimportant."
- **If think something is wrong, call the doctor!** "Do this as often as you need to. If you're overreacting, that's OK. It's better to err on the side of nothing being wrong."
- **Be aware of the signs of early labor.** Labor doesn't necessarily mean you're doubled over in pain. "It can just be tightness, so don't ignore the signs," Kowalski says. "If you feel this way for an hour and there's a change in vaginal discharge, call the doctor—the sooner you get help, the easier it is to stop premature labor."



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- **See a maternal fetal specialist,** an obstetrician who completes extra education in the care of complicated pregnancies. This specialist will develop a plan for your care and delivery, bringing in other health professionals as needed. For example, your baby may or may not need care in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), but your maternal fetal doctor will make sure you meet with the NICU team, just in case. “If your baby needs the NICU, you’ll be more comfortable if you already know the caregivers and are familiar with the equipment and surroundings.”
- **Make sure you can get all your care in one hospital.** Does the hospital have all the specialists you or your baby may need? Does it have the highest level neonatal intensive care unit (Level III)? “You can’t foresee every problem, so you want to make sure that every resource you might need is right there,” Kowalski says. “You don’t want to wait hours for care or be away from your baby because she has to be transferred.”
- **If you’re on bed rest, stay connected.** “It’s easy to feel disconnected when you’re on bed rest. Get a laptop—you can lie back and read, even shop online. Let people visit you. Try to keep your spirits up, knowing you won’t be in this situation forever.”
- **Don’t say no to people who want to help,** especially if you’re on bed rest. “People brought me meals, came over and played with my daughter or went shopping for me,” Kowalski says. “It helped me relax and stay in bed where I was supposed to be.”
- **Be each other’s rock.** “You and your partner may be crumbling inside, but you need to talk to each other and decide how you’ll support each other,” she says. “Understand what each partner needs, and stick together. If one of you is very emotional, for example, the other needs to gather and understand all the information.”
- **Enjoy your pregnancy.** “For many people, having a high-risk pregnancy takes the pleasure out of being pregnant,” Kowalski says. “Be optimistic and blissful. Enjoy the baby growing inside of you.”



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