

The Hormones of Pregnancy

Hormones run the show during pregnancy. Here's what each one does, how you might feel it, and how levels shift from early pregnancy to after birth.



MEET YOUR HORMONES · dots show relative levels by trimester, at birth and after (↓ = drops quickly)

hCG hCG <i>The pregnancy-test hormone</i> Made by: The developing placenta What it does: Signals that you're pregnant and keeps progesterone flowing early on. It's what pregnancy tests detect. It peaks around 8–11 weeks, then falls and levels off. You might notice: Nausea and morning sickness, which often ease in the second trimester. When to call: If you can't keep food or fluids down, are losing weight, or feel dizzy. Severe vomiting (hyperemesis gravidarum) is treatable.	P Progesterone <i>The pregnancy keeper</i> Made by: Your ovaries at first, then the placenta What it does: Keeps the uterine lining in place and helps keep the uterus relaxed so it doesn't contract too early. Levels keep rising throughout pregnancy. You might notice: Tiredness (especially early on), heartburn, constipation and bloating, since it relaxes muscles throughout your body.
E Estrogen <i>The builder</i> Made by: Mostly the placenta What it does: Increases blood flow, helps your uterus and placenta grow, and develops the milk ducts in your breasts. You might notice: A stuffy nose, nosebleeds, darker skin patches on your face, breast changes and that pregnancy "glow."	RLX Relaxin <i>The loosener</i> Made by: Your ovaries and the placenta What it does: Relaxes blood vessels and the uterus early in pregnancy. It may help loosen ligaments and soften the cervix, but researchers are still learning how much. You might notice: Looser joints, hip or pelvic discomfort, or feeling off balance. If pelvic pain makes walking hard, ask about physical therapy.
hPL hPL <i>Human placental lactogen</i> Made by: The placenta What it does: Shifts your metabolism so more glucose reaches your baby, partly by making your body more resistant to insulin. It's highest in the third trimester. You might notice: Nothing directly, but it's one reason you're screened for gestational diabetes at 24–28 weeks. Gestational diabetes is common and can be managed.	PRL Prolactin <i>The milk maker</i> Made by: The pituitary gland in your brain What it does: Prepares your breasts to make milk. High progesterone holds back full milk production until the placenta is delivered. You might notice: Fuller breasts and sometimes leaking colostrum, your first milk. Leaking or not doesn't predict your milk supply.
OXT Oxytocin <i>The labor and love hormone</i> Made by: Your brain, released by the pituitary gland What it does: Powers contractions, helps your uterus contract after birth to limit bleeding, triggers milk let-down and supports bonding. Skin-to-skin can help boost it. Pitocin, a synthetic form, can start labor, strengthen contractions, or prevent and treat heavy bleeding. You might notice: Contractions, and cramping (afterpains) while breastfeeding in the first days after birth.	END Endorphins <i>Your natural pain relief</i> Made by: Your brain What it does: Rise during labor to help your body cope with pain and stress. You might notice: A focused, "in the zone" feeling during labor. Feeling calm, safe and supported may help your body do this work.

After birth: the big drop

Once the placenta is delivered, estrogen and progesterone fall quickly. Along with little sleep, this shift can bring the **baby blues**: weepiness, mood swings and worry that often start a few days after birth and usually ease within 2 weeks. Postpartum depression and anxiety are common and treatable. They can start any time in the first year, and partners can have them too.

Call your provider if sadness, anxiety or hopelessness lasts longer than 2 weeks, gets worse, makes it hard to care for yourself or your baby, or you feel numb, disconnected or not like yourself.

Get help right away if you see or hear things others don't, feel very confused, or can't sleep even when you have the chance.

You're not alone. Free, 24/7 support:

1-833-TLC-MAMA (1-833-852-6262)
National Maternal Mental Health Hotline, call or text

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text) if you have thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

911 if you think it's an emergency