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What's Best for Baby

Pregnancy Care Options Abound

by Michelle Moon Reinhardt
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images



Ann Guidry with midwife Natalie Lake and Sam Jet Guidry Monger

Ann Guidry waited a long time to be pregnant.

After fertility treatments resulted in the heartbreak of two miscarriages, Guidry and her husband Karl Monger decided to take a break from medical intervention. She says she stopped taking fertility drugs more than a year ago, but stayed on prenatal vitamins in hopes nature would intercede.

That's when Guidry became pregnant—happily, and a bit unexpectedly. She faced a decision to either return to her obstetrician or go another route.

"I didn't feel like traditional, Western doctors believed the way that I did, and I didn't want to have to fight with them to have the kind of pregnancy I wanted," she says.

While Guidry was willing to explore Western medicine treatments to address her infertility, once pregnancy was achieved she felt she wanted a different approach.

"I wanted to place my care in the hands of someone who felt and believed as I did," she says. Guidry interviewed several local midwives and chose Natalie Lake with Full Circle Midwifery Services to oversee her prenatal care.

Guidry says that belief was put to the test when she began spotting early on. "It was terrifying," says Guidry. "I had already had two miscarriages." After carefully reviewing her activity level, diet and medications, her midwife recommended Guidry stop taking a daily, low-dose aspirin. "She made the correlation between the aspirin—which is essentially a blood thinner—and the spotting," says Guidry. "She spent a lot of time talking me through that. I don't think I would have gotten the same care in a traditional practice."

On April 9, 2008, Guidry gave birth to a healthy baby boy at home. Sam Jet Guidry Monger arrived at 6:51am after a short, six-hour labor. "It was a very calm," says Guidry, who had planned every aspect of her delivery, from her favorite soothing music, to candlelight, to the water birth. "It was

Pregnancy Care Resources

The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists—This nonprofit organization advocates quality healthcare for women and patient education. With more than fifty-two thousand members, the organization also serves as a referral for member doctors. For more information, visit www.acog.org.

Babybee Basics—Bethany Winder is a registered nurse offering in-home child birth, breastfeeding and baby care classes. Classes start at seventy-five dollars. For more information call 512-626-4165 or visit babybeebasics.com.

Full Circle Midwifery Services—Natalie Lake and Meredith Klein are certified professional midwives offering prenatal and postpartum care, along with home birthing services. For more information call 512-444-0617 or visit www.fullcirclemidwiferyservices.com.

Holding a Space from Within—Anastasia "Sasha" Eckhart is a certified doula who supports women through pregnancy, labor, delivery and breastfeeding. She offers several packages, depending on the level of service needed during pregnancy and postpartum care, including home visits, meals and photography services. Fees range from \$800 to \$2,200, but Eckhart offers a sliding scale for women who may have a financial hardship or have husbands who are deployed with the military. For more information, visit www.holdingaspacefromwithin.org or call 512-695-1144.

Total Mommy Fitness—This in-home personal training service tailors fitness and nutrition programs for expectant parents in the Austin area. For more information call 512-428-5673 or visit www.totalmommyfitness.com.

—Michelle Moon Reinhardt

wonderful. I can't wait to do it again," says Guidry, who is now thirty-nine years old. After all, she'd waited a long time already.

The National Center for Health Statistics reported that four-point-two million American women gave birth in 2006, the last year for which statistics are available.

"Giving birth is one of the most physical tasks anyone can do. You wouldn't run a marathon without training; why would you want to go into labor without having prepared for it?"

—Tatum Rebelle

Nearly one-third of women will have some kind of pregnancy-related complication, whether it's high blood pressure, diabetes or unexpected bleeding. That's why healthcare providers of all stripes recommend women receive prenatal care, which can prevent problems from developing, or getting worse.

Prenatal providers

While obstetricians may be the most common provider of prenatal care, pregnant women may be

cared for by a range of providers, including family practitioners, certified professional midwives or certified nurse midwives.

Natalie Lake, who cared for Guidry, has been a certified professional midwife for eight years. Certified professional midwives

are required to pass a national exam. Licensed practitioners, like Lake, are also required by the state of Texas to complete continuing education and are supervised by the Department of State Health Services. According to Texans for Midwifery, there are approximately one hundred fifty licensed midwives in the state.

Certified professional midwives may independently manage women's healthcare services relating to pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period, but they have no

prescribing powers under state law. Certified professional midwives also provide normal newborn care for up to six weeks of age.

"We provide the same standard of care as a traditional obstetrical practice: the same blood work, the standard prenatal screenings, the prenatal vitamins, the frequency of visits are all the same," says Lake. "The biggest difference is that we are able to spend more time during our visits with patients." Lake says she routinely schedules one hour to see one patient, instead of the standard ten or fifteen minutes that an obstetrician may spend with each patient.

While obstetricians refer their patients to a hospital for the birth and delivery, the biggest departure using a midwife is that the birth is usually at home or in a birthing center, and without the aid of pain medications or anesthesia. "We have an attitude that the woman will be ready for the experience of birth, and there's an expectation that the body can do this," says Lake, who says her patients go through a series of classes to prepare for labor.

Lake says her practice does transport about ten percent of their patients to the hospital. Most of the transports are not due to complications, but rather, the result of a long, exhausting labor.

In general, Lake says, births attended by midwives have a lower complication rate and a lower rate of interventions, such as cesarean sections. For the general population, the rate of cesarean sections is on the rise, to thirty-one-point-one percent of all births, according to National Center for Health statistics. The percentage of all births delivered by cesarean has climbed fifty percent over the last decade.

What's coming?

Bethany Winder is a registered nurse who estimates she has witnessed more than one thousand hospital births during her ten years as a labor and delivery nurse. "I've seen a lot of births and a lot of laboring women," she says. "Understanding as much as you can about the process ahead of time really helps patients be better prepared and more comfortable during the

process.”

Winder has taken her vast experience as a nurse and has turned that into a business helping expectant parents prepare for the birth and beyond. Her company, Babybee Basics, offers child birth, baby care and breastfeeding classes in Austin, Georgetown and Round Rock. While area hospitals offer similar education classes for their patients, Winder makes home visits and tailors the classes to their needs. Babybee Basic classes range from seventy-five to one hundred fifty dollars.

“It’s very helpful to do this kind of training in the home. We get into questions like, ‘Where are you going to put the bassinette? Where will you bathe the baby?’ We can actually practice those things before the baby arrives,” she says.

“A lot of my patients may not be comfortable in a group setting, or just don’t have the time to spend eight hours in an evening class,” says Winder. “Knowledge decreases your fear and increases your confidence, so that’s why these education classes are so important for the first-time parent.”

“Giving birth is really the first step in parenting. First, it’s not in your control. It’s good to have a plan, but you don’t know exactly what’s going to happen. That’s really what parenthood is all about. You don’t know what kind of child you might have or what kind of personality they might have. Parenting is really about improvising. I give them the tools and education, so they can improvise with confidence,” she says.

Exercise and nutrition

As a certified personal trainer, Tatum Rebelle noticed a troubling trend. “My female clients would get pregnant and stop coming in to exercise,” says Rebelle, who started Total Mommy Fitness three years ago. “I saw so many women cling to old information about exercise and pregnancy, and that’s when I decided to start a personal training service for them.”

Rebelle’s company now offers in-home personal training tailored for pregnant and postpartum women. Individual, hour-long sessions range from seventy-five to ninety-five dollars a session and may be purchased in packages or individual sessions, depending on the client’s needs.

“The old advice said women should be relatively sedentary during pregnancy,” says Rebelle. “But there’s growing research that babies who are born to mothers who exercise are leaner throughout the lives and even have better intelligence than those born to moms who didn’t exercise.”

The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists (ACOG) agrees that exercise can be continued during pregnancy, and recommends activities like walking, swimming and yoga.

Rebelle leads her clients through a workout they can perform throughout their pregnancy and postpartum period. She begins with walking and includes strength training exercises like push-ups, crunches and hip flexor exercises. “We choose exercises that can be modified to do even when you are late in pregnancy,” says Rebelle. “You might start off with a regu-

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Together we are, from left: Natasya Ikbal, MD, Donell Oliver, MD, Diana Weihs, MD, Felicia Nash, MD, Karen Swenson, MD, Vanessa Yium, MD, Nancy Loomis, CNM, Stephanie Reich, MD, and Mary Brown, FNP.

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lar push-up, but modify it to (push-up from) your knees mid-pregnancy or change to doing it (pushing) against the wall by the ninth month.”

“Giving birth is one of the most physical tasks anyone can do. You wouldn’t run a marathon without training; why would you want to go into labor without having prepared for it?” she asks.

Nutrition counseling is also included in the services offered by Total Mommy Fitness. “I’ve been known to raid a pantry or two, to remove the junk food,” says Rebelle, laughing. The ACOG recommends that pregnant women need a mere three hundred additional daily calories during pregnancy. “In my opinion, the advice is as simple as eat good food in abundance, but eat ‘bad’ (fatty, sugary or processed) food in extreme moderation,” she says. “I tell women to pig out on fruits and vegetables and pay attention that they are getting adequate protein.” Rebelle says getting nutrients from fresh, whole foods is best, suggesting nuts as a source of protein and avocado as a source of healthy fats.

“All food types are needed in pregnancy, but the best foods come from whole sources,” says Rebelle.

“The ability to improve two lives, with one lifestyle change is powerful,” says Rebelle. “The children born to these mothers will have a better, more active life because of it.”

Support and coaching

Vanessa Rankin knew she didn’t want to repeat the birth of her first daughter, who was born healthy, but only after a very long, difficult labor. While she didn’t want to change her doctor, she knew she wanted more support during her pregnancy and labor than the first time around. Rankin chose to hire a doula, a nonmedical assistant, who provides support during both pregnancy and childbirth.

“Our doula made (labor and delivery) a million times better,” says Rankin, who had a natural birth at the hospital. Gwendalyn Rose arrived May 15, 2008, a healthy, nine pound, five ounce baby girl. “Our doula was like a coach and a

friend. Not necessarily like a mom, but certainly someone who’s been through the experience, so that takes a lot of stress and pressure off of my husband.”

Rankin chose Anastasia “Sasha” Eckhart as her doula, after interviewing several women. Eckhart has five children of her own, and has been present at more than two hundred births. Doulas are not allowed to examine the woman or give any prenatal care; rather they provide emotional support and experience through the process of pregnancy and birth.

“Sasha came with me to all my prenatal appointments,” says Rankin, who says it was during labor that Eckhart proved invaluable. “I was only able to have a natural birth because of her. She had me try different labor positions at the hospital, to relieve some of the pain. When I didn’t think I could make it any more, she helped get me through it,” says Rankin.

“I think we are done (having children),” says Rankin, now thirty years of age, holding her infant daughter, while her other daughter, a toddler, swings nearby. “But if I had to do it again, I would definitely want Sasha or another doula with me.”

Michelle Moon Reinhardt survived two successful pregnancies, which ensured she would never wear a bikini again. Her children are now nine and six. You may e-mail Michelle at mreinhardt@goodlifemag.com.

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