



Allow us to plant a seed in your mind...

If you are having a cesarean, consider "seeding" your baby with your vaginal secretions to give them some of the bacterial benefits of vaginal birth. To share the mother's vaginal and intestinal microbes, a sterile gauze pad soaked in saline can be inserted into the mother's vagina before birth, (for at least an hour if possible) and then applied to the baby's skin, eyes, nose and mouth after birth. The risks and benefits* of this procedure are the same as those present in vaginal birth.⁷⁶

*Note: ACOG does not recommend this procedure at this time, due to a lack of research on it.

The microbiome: your baby's birthright

We've been trained to think bacteria, fungi, and viruses are bad news, but a healthy adult has at least 1000 strains and 100 trillion (mostly) beneficial microbes, which actually outnumber our human cells 10 to 1. Altogether, this collection of helpful organisms is called our microbiome. It exists in our mouths, on our skin, in our colons, in our guts, and in the vagina, too. Adults carry around three to five pounds of these helpful little guys. Without them, we would be unable to digest our food, synthesize certain essential vitamins, absorb water, or fend off other dangerous microbes.

Science is still in the early stages of understanding how important this symbiotic relationship is to every human being. Sometimes called the "forgotten organ," our good flora make up an estimated 60-80% of our immune systems. They produce Vitamin K, aid digestion, affect our cognitive functioning and our moods. Unhealthy microbiomes have been linked to diabetes, urinary tract infections (UTIs), Group Beta Strep (GBS), yeast infections, inflammation, gut disorders like Irritable Bowel Disease and Crohn's disease, auto-immune disorders, anxiety, depression, allergies, hay fever, and eczema colic in babies, chronic fatigue, gum disease and cavities, appetite and obesity, autism, cancer, kidney stones, chronic heart disease, HIV, cirrhosis, and more.^{74, 75}

So, how does all of this apply to birth? Once again, we see that mothers and babies have systems that work together perfectly to support life and good health. Babies are first primed in the womb (once thought to be sterile), and then born through the vagina -- a place teeming with bacteria, right next to a place with even more bacteria. In fact, pregnant moms experience changes in the vaginal microbiome as species grow that will colonize and benefit the baby. As babies make their way down through the birth canal, they are being pressed and squeezed and inoculated with good microbes, which go into their eyes, their noses, their mouths, and are pressed into their skin and retained by their vernix (the protective, waxy coating on their skin at birth). As babies receive skin-to-skin contact and breastfeed after birth, even more good bacteria joins the mix. Colostrum and breastmilk contain more good bacteria (and breastmilk also contains the perfect sugars to feed the bacteria). The beneficial microbes babies take on during and after birth develop over their first three years to become their lifetime microbial "footprint." In vaginal birth and breastfeeding, babies retain a microbial pattern that has been passed on for generations, grandmother to mother to baby.

You can support your own healthy microbiome before your baby is born, and after, with a whole food, high-fiber diet in the form of more small meals: vegetables and fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds. Add apple cider vinegar, sour/acidic foods, and bacteria-rich foods (such as yogurt, natto, kvass, kefir, miso, tempeh, kombucha, sauerkraut, and kimchi). Avoid antibiotics, chemical cleaners, and chlorinated water. Supplement with probiotics regularly -- especially in the last three months of pregnancy, if you've taken antibiotics, or if you are trying to combat vaginal GBS colonization, yeast infections, or UTIs (some studies support sleeping with a panty liner soaked in probiotics as well). Watch your stress levels and get lots of sleep. Don't smoke. Cut back on meats, dairy, simple sugars, starches, vegetable oils, artificial sweeteners, white flours, gluten, processed foods, and emulsifiers (like carrageenan, polysorbate 80, lecithin, polyglycerols, xanthan gum and other "gums," sometimes added to creamy foods and baked goods). Avoid anti-bacterial soap and play in the dirt. Play with a dog. And watch for emerging research about the amazing microbiome.