

Inspiring women

Love
Without
Limits
Carlee Dawodu's Life
of Open Arms

In the Middle
Thriving in the Sandwich
Generation

 **Franciscan**
HEALTH

Glowing
Made Simple
Skincare Routine
for All Ages

The GOAT Strawberry
Spinach Salad
Featuring Creamy Goat Cheese,
Juicy Strawberries and a Hint
of Sweetness

Bloom Where
You're Planted
Starting Your Own
Backyard Garden

Birth Your Way
From Natural Birth to Cesareans
and Everything in Between

Letter *from* Franciscan Health

Hello!

As sunlight stretches a little longer and flowers bloom a little brighter, we welcome you to this radiant issue of *Inspiring Women*. There's something about this season that whispers possibility—a reminder that growth often begins right where we are, even in the mess, the middle or the waiting.

In these pages, you'll find stories and inspiration that celebrate the full bloom of womanhood—from the quiet strength of mothers leaning on grace, to the joy of refreshing your spirit (and your skin!) as summer settles in.

We're honored to share Carlee Dawodu's story in "Love Without Limits"—a beautiful glimpse into what it means to live with open arms and a heart that welcomes others like family. Her life is a living reminder that love—real, raw, Christlike love—changes everything.

Motherhood is a major theme this issue, and with it, we hold space for both the joy and the ache. In "The True Strength Behind a Mother", we reflect on the unseen strength that comes from surrender, not self-reliance. And in "Feeling Loss on Mother's Day", we acknowledge the silent grief many women carry—because love and loss often hold hands.

You'll also find practical joy woven throughout—playful ways to make hydration fun for kids, fresh recipes that celebrate summer's best and tips for caring for your skin at any age. We're especially excited about "Build-Your-Own Puffins" (trust us—you'll want to try them!) and our beautiful strawberry spinach salad featuring goat cheese and a touch of sweetness.

Wherever you are in your season—mothering littles, caring for aging parents, tending your garden or your soul—we pray this issue helps you feel seen, refreshed and rooted in hope.



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The True Strength Behind a Mother

²⁵ She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.

²⁶ She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

²⁷ She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

²⁸ Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:

²⁹ ‘Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all.’

³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

³¹ Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.”

Proverbs 31:25-31 (NIV)

Moms are heroes in every sense of the word. They care for us when we're sick, cheer us on when we're struggling and seem to have an endless capacity to give. Whether staying up late to finish a school project or offering a listening ear after a tough day, moms are often the people we lean on the most. It's easy to see them as superhuman—but even the strongest moms don't rely on their own strength.

Proverbs 31 gives us a picture of a woman whose strength, wisdom and faithfulness shine brightly. But this passage also points us to the source of these qualities: God. The strength of a godly mom doesn't come from her ability to do it all but from her dependence on Him.

Take, for instance, a mom balancing work, school pickups and caring for aging parents. She might feel stretched thin, but her strength comes from her trust in God. As verse 25 reminds us, “She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.” Her courage isn't rooted in knowing the future but in knowing the One who holds it all.

Moms are also the first teachers in many of our lives, pouring wisdom and kindness into their children's hearts. Whether it's patiently guiding a toddler through a tantrum or encouraging a teen to trust in God during a hard time, their words reflect His love. Proverbs 31:26 declares, “She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.” This wisdom comes not from the world but from God's Word, the ultimate source of truth and guidance.

We also see God's care mirrored in the tireless love of a mother. Think of a mom who wakes early to prepare lunches, spends her day managing her family's needs and still finds time to pray over her children at night.

Her diligence reflects the heart of a God who never stops caring for His children. As verse 27 proclaims, “She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.”

It's fitting to honor mothers for all they do, but remember that their goodness is evidence of God's work in their lives. As we celebrate them, remember that a Godly mother's love and faithfulness are gifts from Him, and her life points us back to His glory.

In a world that values beauty, accomplishments and busyness, verse 30 offers a freeing truth: “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” A mother's worth is not found in meeting impossible standards or checking every box but in her relationship with God. When she trusts Him, her life becomes a light to those around her, showing the eternal worth of walking with the Lord.

Ultimately, the Proverbs 31 woman is honored not because she's perfect but because her life glorifies God. Whether making breakfast, offering a prayer or comforting a hurting heart, her actions point to the true hero—God Himself.

This Mother's Day, let's celebrate the moms in our lives for their love, faithfulness and care. But more importantly, let's praise God, who works through mothers to reflect His own strength and love. A mother's life is a powerful reminder that God is the Ultimate Provider, Sustainer and Hero in every journey.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of mothers. Bless them with strength, wisdom and peace as they care for their families. May their lives always point to You, and may they find joy in knowing their worth is found in Your love. Amen.

6 Fun Ways to Make Water Wonderful for Kids



Fruit Fiesta Water

Let kids add slices of their favorite fruits like strawberries or oranges to water for a flavorful and colorful drink.



Water With a Straw

Provide colorful, fun-shaped straws to make drinking water more exciting for kids. Opt for reusable straws to make it a fun and eco-friendly habit!



Bubbly Sparkle

Mix plain or flavored sparkling water with a splash of 100% fruit juice for a fizzy, soda-like treat.



Colorful Ice Cubes

Freeze berries, mint, citrus slices or fruit juice in ice cube trays for a fun, flavorful burst as they melt—making every sip more refreshing!



Healthy Flavor Boosters

Skip the sugary mixes—opt for natural flavor packets with electrolytes or real fruit extracts. Or make your own with dried fruit or fresh herbs for a refreshing twist!



Personal Water Bottles

Let your kiddo pick a water bottle they like. Whether it's unicorns or superheroes, if they like their bottle, they're more likely to drink from it!



Build-Your-Own Puffins

This Mother's Day, let the kids whip up something special with "Build-Your-Own Puffins"! These fluffy, pancake-inspired muffins (not to be confused with the cute little birds) are perfect for little chefs to customize with their favorite mix-ins—think chocolate chips, fresh berries or a sprinkle of love. Easy to make and fun to bake, puffins are the sweetest way to serve up breakfast and smiles for Mom!

You can modify this recipe to fit your dietary restrictions. For example, gluten-free or dairy-free pancake mix, your favorite milk substitute, etc.

PREP: 5 minutes • COOK: 20 minutes • SERVES: 12

Ingredients

- 3 cups pancake mix (your choice of the "just add water" variety)
- 1 ¾ cups milk
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- 1 cup mix-ins of choice
- 1 cup desired toppings

Directions

- 1 | **PREHEAT THE OVEN** to 350°F. Line a 12-cup muffin tin with baking liners.
- 2 | **IN A LARGE BOWL**, combine pancake mix, milk and maple syrup. Whisk until smooth, but do not overmix. This will keep your puffins fluffy!
- 3 | **FILL** each muffin tin with the batter.
- 4 | **HERE IS THE FUN PART.** Add whatever mix-ins you want. Blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, bananas, chocolate chips, hazelnut spread, peanut butter, espresso, nuts, raisins, dried cranberries, protein powder—the possibilities are endless. Use a butter knife to gently swirl mix-ins into the batter.
- 5 | **BAKE** for about 20 to 22 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center of the puffins comes out clean.
- 6 | **TOP WITH YOUR PREFERRED TOPPINGS:** powdered sugar, whipped cream, maple syrup or whatever your mom's favorite is!

Pro Tip: These are great for meal prep as they can be stored in the fridge for a week or in the freezer for six months.





ASK AN EXPERT

OB/GYN & FertilityCare

Kate Marshall, DNP, CNM
Southside OB/GYN-AXIA

*Kate Marshall is an independent provider.

For All Women

1. Will wearing tight bras or underwire cause breast cancer?

No. There is no evidence linking any type of bra to breast cancer. Cancer is caused by genetic and environmental factors, not particular undergarments.

2. Do periods need to be exactly 28 days long to be normal?

No. A normal cycle ranges from 24 to 38 days with 28 days being the average. Periods last on average two to seven days. Various factors can influence the length of a menstrual cycle, including stress, weight changes, certain medical conditions and even changes in diet or exercise. You should consult with a medical professional if your period suddenly changes from your normal cycle.

3. Do I stop needing OB/GYN visits after menopause?

No. Regular OB/GYN visits are important for monitoring overall health, pelvic health and hormone changes. Cancer screenings such as pap smears and mammograms should be done regularly as well.

4. Is urinary leakage just a normal part of aging?

No. Urinary leakage is not an inevitable part of aging. While bladder changes are common with age, frequent leakage is not something you have to accept. Pelvic floor exercises, lifestyle changes and medical treatments can help strengthen bladder control.

For Pregnant Women

1. Does carrying high or low predict my baby's gender?

No. This is an old wives' tale. Belly shape is determined by muscle tone, body shape, size and baby's position—not gender. The only reliable ways to determine gender are ultrasound and genetic testing.

2. Can spicy food induce labor?

No. There's no scientific proof that spicy food induces labor. Some foods can cause digestive upset or dehydration that can cause the uterus to cramp but does not bring on actual labor.

3. Can having sex during pregnancy harm the baby?

No. The baby is well-protected by the uterus, amniotic sac and amniotic fluid. Your OB provider may have you abstain from sexual activity with certain pregnancy problems like preterm labor or problems with your placenta, but having sex will not harm the baby in a normal, low-risk pregnancy.

4. Will sleeping on my back hurt my baby?

In later pregnancy, lying on your back for long periods can reduce blood flow to the uterus. This is due to the weight of the baby putting pressure on a major blood vessel that runs along your back. You may feel lightheaded or dizzy before your baby will be affected. If you wake up on your back, simply shift to your side.



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Feeling Loss

on Mother's Day

Some of us eagerly anticipate Mother's Day. It's a chance to shower our moms with flowers and heartfelt tokens of appreciation, or to be celebrated by our own children with hand-painted flower pots and a lovingly prepared breakfast in bed. But for others, Mother's Day brings the ache of grief, loss and bittersweet memories, along with a mix of emotions that aren't so easily celebrated.

Missing a Piece of Your Heart

Not everyone has a mom to celebrate. Perhaps your mom has passed away, was never present in your life or has chosen not to be part of it. On a day meant for love and connection, that absence can feel like a deep and painful void.

For others, Mother's Day is a reminder of a different kind of loss. Maybe you longed to be a mother but never had the chance. Perhaps you've experienced the heartbreaking loss of a child—whether through miscarriage, stillbirth or the devastating loss of a son or daughter in any stage of life.

The Complexity of Grief

Grief is a complex companion, especially on days like Mother's Day. It doesn't follow a timeline or fit neatly into a box. Some years, the pain may feel like a dull ache; other years, it rushes in like a wave, catching you off guard. It's okay to acknowledge that this day might not look or feel like a greeting card—and it's okay to feel whatever emotions come your way.

Finding Comfort in Shared Struggles

If Mother's Day is hard for you, you're not alone. Many others carry similar heartaches, even if they don't speak about them openly. Perhaps this year is the first Mother's Day without your mom, or maybe it's one of many. Maybe you're struggling

with infertility or mourning the dreams you had for a family that never came to be. There are a lot of women out there going through a similar situation. Whatever your story, know that your feelings are valid and shared by others walking a similar road.

Making Space for Healing

It's important to give yourself permission to grieve in your own way. You might choose to honor your mom with a quiet moment of prayer, visit her resting place or spend time reflecting on cherished memories. If you're grieving the loss of a child, lighting a candle or journaling about your love for them can be a powerful way to honor their memory. And if you're carrying unfulfilled dreams of motherhood, consider ways to care for yourself—whether it's spending time in nature, leaning into your faith or talking with a trusted friend.

A Hope That Endures

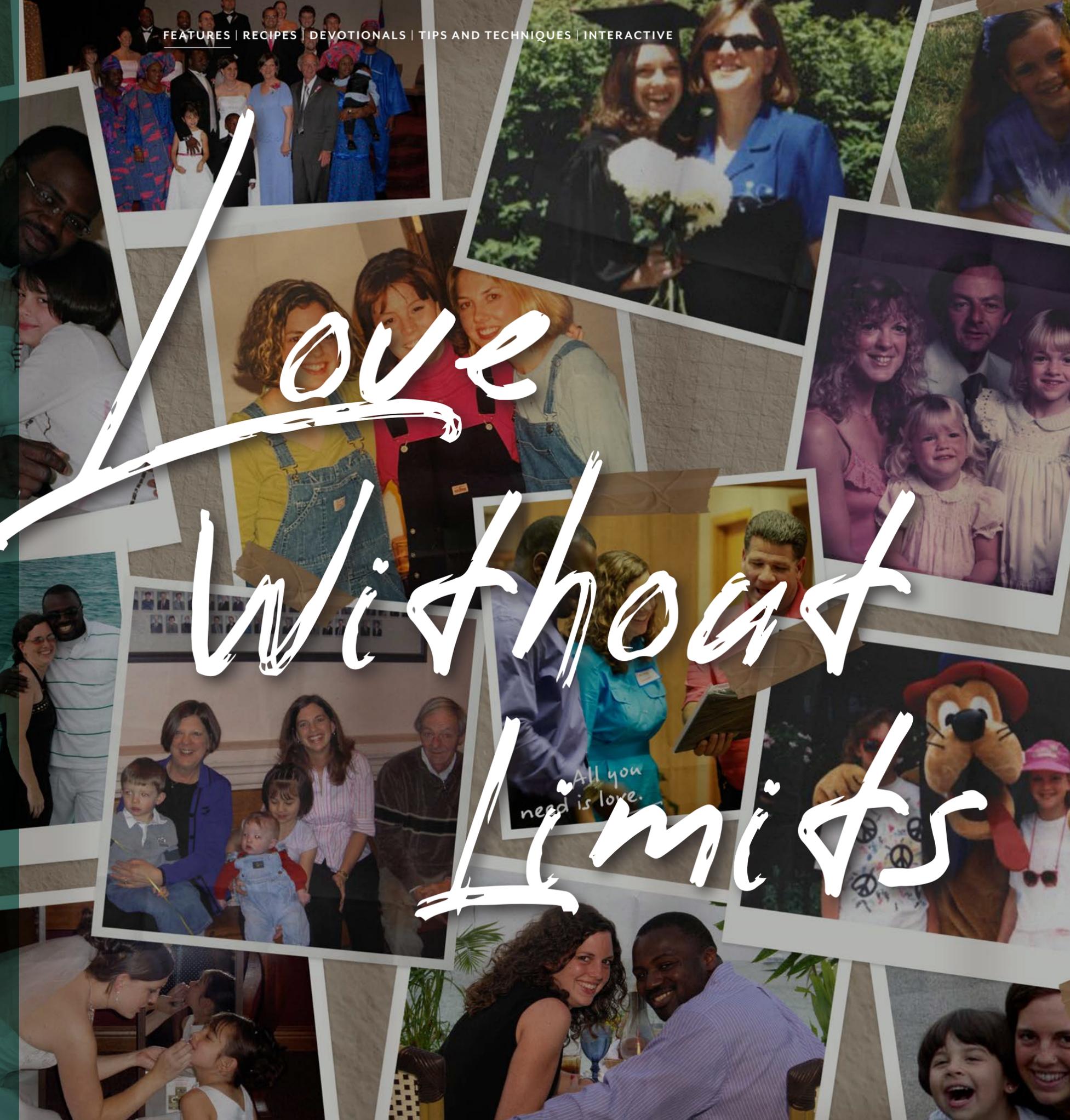
Even in the pain, there is hope. Our faith reminds us that we are never truly alone. God sees our sorrow and meets us in our grief. Psalm 34:18 reminds us, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." When the weight of the day feels overwhelming, lean into His presence. Let Him carry what feels too heavy to bear.

Finding New Meaning

While Mother's Day may never look the way you once envisioned, there's beauty in finding new ways to approach it. Consider reaching out to a spiritual mother, a mentor or a woman who has been like a mother to you. Celebrate the impact she's had on your life. Or offer love to someone else who may be hurting—a widow, a grieving friend or someone facing their own loss. Sometimes, the act of giving can be healing for our own wounds. ●

"The Lord is close to
the brokenhearted and
saves those who are
crushed in spirit."

Psalm 34:18 (NIV)



Carlee Dawodu's *Life of Open Arms*

Carlee Dawodu never set out to have a house full of daughters.

She didn't dream of motherhood the way some little girls do, imagining baby names and nursery colors. In fact, as a young woman, she wasn't even sure marriage and children were in her future.

But God had other plans.

Today, Carlee is a mother to seven girls, a woman whose life has been shaped by faith, foster care and a willingness to step into the unknown. Her story is one of saying "yes"—again and again and again—even when she didn't have all the answers, even when it was hard.

A Heart for the Vulnerable

Carlee grew up in Carmel, Indiana, in what she describes as a "privileged life"—not in the sense of wealth, but in the security of two loving, involved parents. Yet, even in her sheltered childhood, she felt drawn to people who were struggling.

"I was that kid who wanted to take in every stray," she says with a laugh. "I remember watching the news as a child and hearing about a baby left in a dumpster. I was 12, and I told my parents, 'I'm going to find that baby and raise it.'"

That tender heart led her to Purdue University, where she graduated with a degree in early childhood education in May of 2001. She imagined a future in teaching—until she began student teaching at Head Start, a program serving children from low-income families. It was there, in a classroom filled with children from difficult backgrounds, that her life shifted.

That year, she not only became a Christian but also encountered foster care for the first time. She met a set of twin boys in her class whose foster placement was uncertain. Their caseworker was worried. She and a coworker decided to pray for them all weekend. When they returned on Monday, they learned the boys' original placement had fallen through, and instead, they had been placed with a loving, faith-filled family.

"It was the first time I truly saw the power of prayer," she says. "And the first time I realized how desperately good foster families were needed."

CONTINUE READING >>>





Carlee's first foster daughter - 2004

From "Maybe Someone Else" to "Why Not Me?"

At first, Carlee thought her role would be to encourage others to foster. She joined a church, got involved in the youth group and told everyone about the need for foster families. But when she realized that many people were hesitant, fearful of government involvement and skeptical of the system, she decided to take foster care classes herself. "I thought I'd be the guinea pig," she says. "I'll go through it and tell everyone, 'Look, I survived!'" What she didn't expect was to become a foster mom herself.

"I genuinely didn't think I was allowed to foster as a single woman," she says. "But at the end of the training, someone looked at me and said, 'You already volunteer with youth teenagers once a week. Why not take in a child temporarily who needs a home?'"

In 2004, at 24 years old, Carlee opened her home to her first foster child, a 12-year-old girl. "It was trial by fire," Carlee admits. "Foster care isn't easy. But I knew I was called to do it."

Her foster daughter had multiple siblings who had been split up, moved from home to home, and experienced deep trauma. Carlee had the heartbreaking honor of throwing this 12-year-old girl her very first birthday party. She stayed with Carlee for six months before transitioning to another placement, and though it was hard to say goodbye, Carlee knew that opening her home—even for a short time—mattered.

"That's the reality of foster care," she says. "It's messy. It's unpredictable. You love kids deeply, and sometimes, you have to let them go."

Meeting Femi and Finding Forever

By the time Carlee was fostering, her life was already full. Between working with kids, volunteering at church and caring for children in her home, she didn't have much time to think about dating—let alone marriage. But God had other plans.

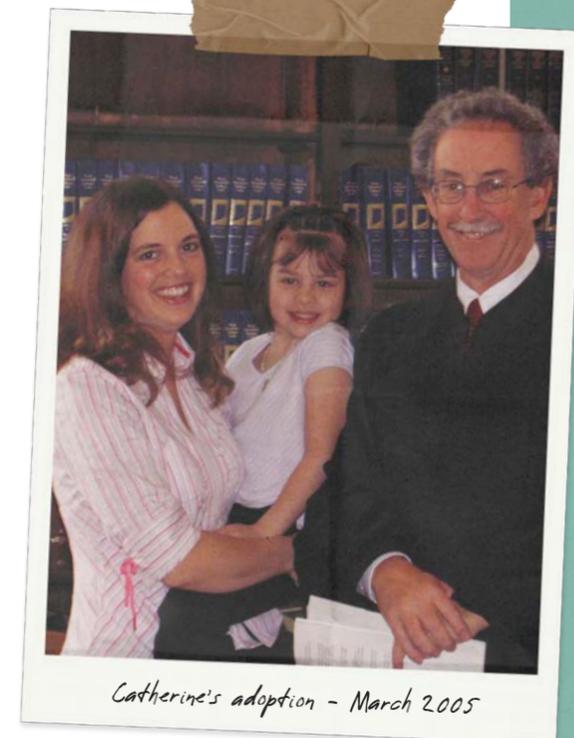
One evening at church, she met Femi, a kind and steady presence who had recently moved to Indiana for a short-term work training program. Originally from Nigeria, Femi's gentle spirit and shared faith quickly drew them together. But just as their relationship began to blossom, Femi's assignment ended, and he relocated with his job to Canada. "We started dating about 30 seconds before he left," Carlee jokes.

Despite the distance, they stayed connected—navigating time zones and long calls while dreaming about what God might be calling them to do. At the same time, Carlee met Catherine, a bold and spirited five-year-old in foster care whose placement was unraveling.

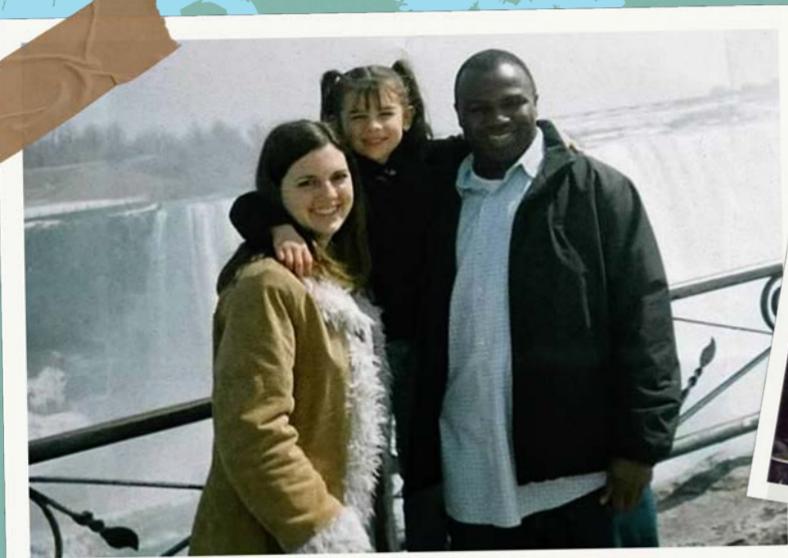
When reunification plans with her father fell through, caseworkers asked Carlee if she would consider adoption. It was a defining moment. She called Femi, still in Canada, and said, "I think God wants me to adopt this little girl." His response? "Yeah, I figured." He had total peace about this next step for Carlee and Catherine.

So, in March 2005, Carlee became Catherine's legal mother. Two years later, after Carlee and Femi married, Femi adopted her too—making official what had already been true in their hearts.

Rather than a honeymoon, they took a "family moon" with Catherine, marking not just the start of their marriage but the beginning of their life as a family. For a little girl who had spent years wondering where she belonged, that trip was more than a celebration—it was home.



Catherine's adoption - March 2005



Femi proposing at Niagara Falls - March 2006



Carlee and Femi's Wedding - August 2006

A Family Grows in Unexpected Ways

Motherhood changed Carlee, but her heart for vulnerable children remained. As she and Femi continued fostering, their family grew—both biologically and through adoption. Their first biological daughter, Keziah, was born in 2008, and shortly after, they felt called to adopt again.

"We assumed adoption in the U.S. wasn't for us. We desired to adopt to meet a need," Carlee says, "and I always assumed there were thousands of families waiting for every baby. But that wasn't the case—especially for Black children and kids with special needs."

In 2010, they adopted Elizabeth through a maternity home in Missouri, where her birth mother was looking for a family with at least one African American parent. Throughout the adoption process and especially during the hospital stay, Carlee was especially drawn to the home's unique model. They included housing, parenting resources and

adoption support, ensuring women had support for whatever avenue they chose for their baby.

"I just kept thinking, this is right," she says. "They had one advocate for the mom and one for the adoptive family. That's genius—someone walking with her the whole time." That experience planted the seeds for Carlee's future adoption work in Lafayette, Indiana.

Not long after Elizabeth's adoption, Carlee and Femi began praying about India, wondering if the Lord had a child there for them. Years later, a friend sent an email about a six-year-old girl named Debjani who was in need of a family. The process took nearly four years. By the time they brought her home, Debjani was 10, and Carlee was pregnant with their second biological daughter, Eden.

"She was grieving so hard," Carlee says. "She had lost everything familiar. At one point, she thought the hotel was our home." Slowly, Debjani began to adjust. In the years that followed, the Dawodus

welcomed two more biological daughters—Jubilee and Aliyah—rounding out their lively family of nine.

"So that's our wild bunch," Carlee laughs. "It's a whole lot of hair. It's a whole lot of feelings."

Gifts of Grace Was Born

Adoption had transformed Carlee's life, but as both an adoptive mom and advocate, she saw a troubling gap: pregnancy resource centers and adoption agencies weren't working together, and expectant mothers contemplating adoption were often handed a list of agencies to vet with little real support or direction. Most agencies treated adoptive families as the primary client—not the birth mother. Carlee knew that had to change.

In 2013, she founded a licensed adoption agency built around a radically different model—one that was centered around the expectant mother.

CONTINUE READING >>>



“Our mission was to walk alongside women as they made one of the hardest decisions of their lives,” she says. “We weren’t here to push adoption. We were here to listen, to support and to make sure they had everything they needed to make the best choice for themselves and their baby.”

Unlike many agencies, Gifts of Grace focused on:

- **Late-Stage Matching** – Allowing moms time to process their pregnancy before choosing adoption, reducing the heartbreak of disrupted placements.
- **Holistic Support** Providing counseling, housing, prenatal care and legal help—regardless of whether the woman chooses adoption.
- **Ethical Placements** Ensuring adoptive families were active Christians and trained in trauma, open adoption and the realities of adoptive parenting.
- **Ongoing Birth Mom Care** Offering lifelong counseling, support groups and Birth Mother’s Day celebrations, far beyond the standard six weeks.

Carlee and her team walked with hundreds of women—attending ultrasounds, doctor’s visits and even being present in the delivery room. Some moms chose to parent, and Gifts of Grace celebrated that. Others chose adoption, and Gifts of Grace stood beside them every step of the way.

“It wasn’t about numbers,” Carlee says. “It was about making sure these women were loved, seen and supported.”

In its 12 years, Gifts of Grace provided adoption support to countless adoptive families, supported hundreds of women as they considered their parenting and adoption options and placed 44 Indiana babies into Christian adoptive families. They built a culture of dignity for birth moms—women too often overlooked in the adoption process.

Now, as the agency closes its doors, Carlee sees it not as an ending, but the end of a season. “The landscape of adoption is changing,” she says. “But what we built—awareness, support networks, families—those things don’t go away.”

The seeds planted will continue to bear fruit.

Life as a Family of Nine

Life is chaotic with even just one child, but seven children bring a whole new level of challenge. Carlee and Femi take it in stride and see the fruits of their labor daily.

- Catherine, now 25 years old, is married to Ray, and the two just celebrated their one-year anniversary. Femi finally has another guy in the family, and Carlee and he are so thankful for how beautifully Ray loves and compliments Catherine! Catherine continues to be an amazing

pianist and is walking in her dad’s footsteps as she recently began studying engineering at Purdue Northwest.

- Debjani, now 21, enjoys singing, piano, guitar and horseback riding. Upon graduating from high school, she worked at Chick-fil-A. She now lives in Tennessee and is hoping to attend college. Debjani has had much to overcome in life, and although it has been a challenging journey, Carlee and Femi are encouraged by the steps she is taking toward healing and independence.
- Keziah just celebrated her seventeenth birthday and is savoring all of the “lasts” of homeschooling, including soccer, drama and her youth group activities. She and Elizabeth are excited to be taking their first international mission trip this summer, as they both have a heart to serve others and share the Gospel.
- In addition to youth group activities, Elizabeth, who is 14, also loves singing, piano, soccer and track.
- Eden, Jubilee and Aliyah, who are 11, 9 and 7 years old, enjoy violin lessons, soccer, gymnastics and playing outside with their neighbor friends all day, every day.

A Mother’s Day Reflection

As Mother’s Day approaches, Carlee’s story reminds us that motherhood isn’t always planned—but it is always a calling. Whether biological, adoptive, foster or spiritual, mothering is about opening your heart and saying “yes” to love.

“I never thought this would be my life,” Carlee says. “But I can’t imagine it any other way.”

This Mother’s Day, may we all be inspired to say yes—to love, faith and the unexpected ways God writes our stories.

“I never thought this would be my life...”

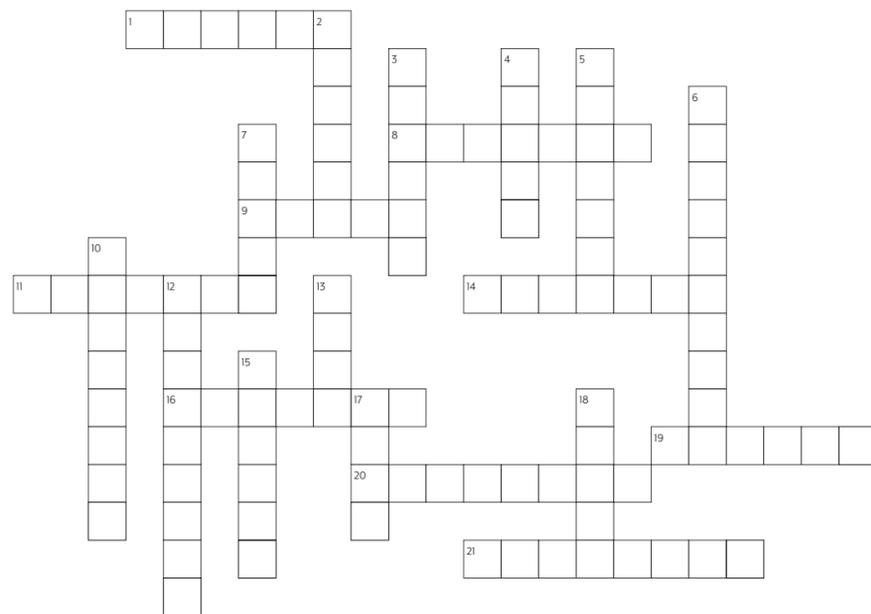
But I can't imagine it any other way.”



Gifts of Grace Ribbon-Cutting - 2013

Inspiring Women

Proverbs 31 Crossword



¹⁰A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than ____ (1 Across). ¹¹Her husband has full ____ (6 Down) in her and lacks nothing of value. ¹²She brings him ____ (13 Down), not harm, all the days of her life. ¹⁵She selects wool and flax and works with ____ (9 Across) hands. ¹⁴She is like the ____ (20 Across) ships, bringing her food from afar. ¹⁵She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and ____ (10 Down) for her female servants. ¹⁶She considers a field and buys it; out of her ____ (21 Across) she plants a vineyard. ¹⁷She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are ____ (2 Down) for her tasks. ¹⁸She sees that her trading is profitable, and her ____ (17 Down) does not go out at night. ¹⁹In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the ____ (16 Across) with her fingers. ²⁰She opens her arms to the poor and ____ (5 Down) her hands to the needy. ²¹When it snows, she has no fear for her ____ (12 Down); for all of them

are clothed in scarlet. ²²She makes coverings for her bed; she is ____ (11 Across) in fine linen and purple. ²³Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the ____ (3 Down) of the land. ²⁴She makes ____ (18 Down) garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. ²⁵She is clothed with strength and ____ (8 Across); she can laugh at the days to come. ²⁶She speaks with ____ (15 Down), and faithful instruction is on her tongue. ²⁷She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the ____ (7 Down) of idleness. ²⁸Her children arise and call her ____ (14 Across); her husband also, and he praises her: ²⁹“Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.” ³⁰Charm is deceptive, and ____ (19 Across) is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. ³¹____ (4 Down) her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

Shelf-Love

A Retreat for Your Mind & Soul



Life moves fast—full of notifications, to-do lists and responsibilities. But carving out time to slow down with a good book isn't just a luxury; it's a gift to your mind and soul. Whatever you choose to read, having a cozy reading spot makes the experience even sweeter. Here are a few things to consider when creating a reading nook in your home.

Find Your Spot

A quiet, comfortable space is the foundation of a great reading nook. It could be a sunlit corner of your bedroom, a cozy window seat or even a tucked-away spot in your living room. The key is choosing a space that feels peaceful and distraction-free—somewhere you can unwind without interruptions. If you love fresh air, consider a porch or balcony nook for an outdoor reading escape.

Pick a Cozy Chair

Comfort is everything when it comes to settling in with a good book. Whether it's a plush armchair, a cushioned bench or even a hammock or porch swing, choose a seating option that supports both relaxation and good posture. If you like to switch up your reading spots, a floor cushion or oversized bean bag can be a great alternative for a more laid-back feel.

Layer in Softness

Adding textures and warmth makes your reading nook feel like a true retreat. Drape a soft throw blanket over your chair for chilly evenings, add plush pillows for extra support and incorporate a woven rug to anchor the space.

Set the Mood

Lighting plays a huge role in creating a cozy atmosphere. Natural light is ideal for daytime reading, so position your nook near a window if possible. For evening or rainy-day reading, add a warm-toned lamp, string lights or a small reading light to create a soft glow that won't strain your eyes. Candles or a Himalayan salt lamp can also add a soothing, peaceful ambiance.

Keep Books Handy

Having books within reach makes it easy to dive into a story whenever you have a spare moment. A small bookshelf, floating wall shelf or even a decorative basket filled with your current reads keeps them close by and adds a stylish touch to your nook. For a cozy, lived-in look, stack a few of your favorite books beside your chair or on a small side table.

Add a Personal Touch

Make your reading nook feel like an extension of your personality. A framed literary quote, a favorite scented candle or a potted plant can bring a sense of calm and inspiration to the space. If you love journaling, keep a notebook and pen nearby for jotting down thoughts or favorite passages from your book.

No matter what fills your bookshelf, your reading nook can be a sacred space—one where you pause, reflect and recharge. So, curl up and let your next great story unfold!

Book Recs From Our Readers

Now that you have your cozy nook, it's time to choose some books and get lost in a great story! These book recommendations came from Inspiring Women members. While each has been reviewed prior to publication, some may not fully align with the values of Franciscan Health in their entirety. We encourage readers to explore these works with thoughtful consideration and discernment.

Faith & Spiritual Growth

- The Purpose Driven Life – Rick Warren
- Hearing God – Peter Lord
- Jesus Calling – Sarah Young
- The Shack – William P. Young
- The Great Divorce – C.S. Lewis
- Forgotten God – Francis Chan

Personal Growth & Self-Discovery

- The Four Agreements – Don Miguel Ruiz
- The Road Less Traveled – M. Scott Peck
- The Language of Letting Go – Melody Beattie
- Owning Your Own Shadow – Robert A. Johnson
- I'm OK, You're OK – Thomas A. Harris
- Fascinating Womanhood – Helen Andelin
- What is Our Purpose in Life? – Eckhart Tolle

Motherhood, Wellness & Natural Living

- Natural Childbirth the Bradley Way – Susan McCutcheon
- Trim Healthy Mama – Pearl Barrett and Serene Allison
- The Encyclopedia of Country Living – Carla Emery

Thought-Provoking Fiction

- The Stand – Stephen King
- The Catcher in the Rye – J.D. Salinger

Inspirational & True Stories

- The Hiding Place – Corrie Ten Boom
- Black Elk Speaks – John G. Neihardt
- Bonnie and Clyde: The Lives Behind the Legend – Paul Schneider
- 13 is Too Young to Die – Isaacsen-Bright

Poetry & Reflections

- On Wings of Praise – Kay D. Rizzo
- For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf – Ntozake Shange
- The Works of Edgar Allan Poe – Edgar Allan Poe

Classic & Timeless Literature

- Little Women – Louisa May Alcott
- The Good Earth – Pearl S. Buck
- Great Expectations – Charles Dickens
- The Old Man and the Sea – Ernest Hemingway
- Gone with the Wind – Margaret Mitchell
- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn – Mark Twain
- 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea – Jules Verne
- The Jungle Book – Rudyard Kipling

In the *Middle*

Thriving in the Sandwich Generation

At a certain point in life, you get stuck in the middle. Your kids are almost grown and out on their own. At the same time, your parents are aging not-so-gracefully, and they need your help, too. It is a phase that no one prepares you for—juggling the demands of parenting your children while also stepping into the role of caregiver for your parents. Dubbed the “sandwich generation,” this stage of life can feel overwhelming, exhausting and even isolating. But it can also be a time of deep connection, personal growth and discovering what matters.



*BETWEEN
THE PAGES OF
A BOOK IS A
LOVELY PLACE
TO BE.*

Inspiring
women

Finding Balance in the Chaos

Thriving in the sandwich generation requires balance, but balance doesn't always mean equal parts. Some days, your focus may shift entirely to a child who needs a shoulder to cry on. On other days, you'll find yourself at a doctor's appointment advocating for your aging parent. And through it all, you're still expected to juggle work, household responsibilities and your own self-care—a task that often falls by the wayside.

Begin finding your balance by setting boundaries and asking for help. Whether you involve your siblings in caregiver responsibilities or ask a friend to grab your kids from practice, remember that you don't have to do it by yourself. Recognizing that you cannot do it all on your own is the first step toward managing expectations and avoiding burnout.

Moments that Matter

Even though this phase is challenging, it is full of meaningful moments. Those long conversations with your teenager, where they are finally opening up to you about their social life or friend drama. The heart-to-heart you have with your dad, who is finally letting his guard down despite never letting his weakness show in the past. These moments remind you why you are in the middle of it all—love for your family and a deeper connection with them.

Focus on all of the positive connections you are building with the generation that came before and the one after you. Celebrate small victories, like a family dinner where everyone is laughing or a quiet morning where your parent shares a story you've never heard. These are the moments that turn the chaos into cherished memories. Take a moment to appreciate how close you've grown to your loved ones through it all.

Practical Tips for Thriving

Delegate and Outsource: Take advantage of grocery delivery, cleaning companies, friends and family to help you save time and energy.

Prioritize Self-Care: Schedule time for yourself—a walk, your favorite hobby or a quiet cup of coffee might be just the thing you need to recharge.

Communicate: Keep everyone informed of the ups and downs. Transparency will foster teamwork and limit misunderstandings.

Plan Ahead: For your parents, consider financial planning and healthcare proxies. For your kids, look ahead at their schedules and plans and prepare however you can. This way you are ready for whatever the future may bring.

It's Only for a Season

You're doing something incredible—loving, supporting and holding your family together in a way only you can. It's not easy, and some days will stretch you to your limits. But in the middle of the chaos, there are moments of beauty, connection and grace. You are not alone, and you are stronger than you think. Take a deep breath, lean on those who love you and trust that God will give you exactly what you need for today. One day, you'll look back and see that this season—hard as it is—was filled with love that made it all worthwhile. You've got this. ●

Bloom Where You're Planted

Starting Your Own Backyard Garden

There's no better feeling than stepping outside, plucking fresh basil for your pasta or snipping a blossomed petunia to add to your house. But, if you've been telling yourself you'd love to start a garden and have been putting it off, don't worry—starting your own backyard garden is way easier than you think (and way more rewarding than another trip to the grocery store). So grab your gloves, roll up your sleeves and let's dig into the basics of starting your own little garden spot!

Pick the Perfect Plot

Think of your plants like yourself—they thrive on sunlight and warmth but need the right balance to stay healthy and vibrant. Most veggies and flowers do best in about six to eight hours of direct sunlight a day, so pick a place that gets plenty of sunlight. Also, think about drainage. Avoid low areas where water pools, which can lead to root rot. Slight slopes or well-draining soil work best, but if your yard is flat, raised beds or adding compost and sand can help. Think of it like your morning coffee—too much, and things get overwhelming; too little, and nothing's thriving!

Make Sure Your Soil is Rich

Think of soil as the foundation of your garden—it's like the self-care routine for your plants. There's no way your plants will thrive in sad, dry dirt. They need nutrient-rich, well-draining soil that's packed with organic nutrients. Treat it well, and it will return the favor. Mix in compost, aged manure or organic matter to give your plants the best chance at growing strong and healthy. If you're not sure about the quality of your soil, a simple at-home soil test kit can tell you what it needs because, just like us, plants appreciate a little customized care! If your backyard has less-than-ideal soil, raised garden beds or container gardening are great alternatives that still let your garden flourish.

Start Simple and Grow Strong

Know that not all plants are created equal, and some are a lot more forgiving than others. If you're a gardening newbie, start with low-maintenance, beginner-friendly options!

Veggies: Cherry tomatoes, lettuce, zucchini and radishes (Quick growers and hard to kill!)

Herbs: Basil, rosemary and mint (They actually prefer to be neglected a little.)

Flowers: Marigolds, zinnias and sunflowers (They basically bloom on autopilot.)

No Drowning Allowed

Of course, your plants need hydration but don't turn your garden into a kiddie pool. Instead of a light sprinkle every day, opt for deep, infrequent watering once or twice a week, just enough to soak the roots without drowning them. Be aware of timing, as watering in the early morning or late afternoon helps prevent evaporation and gives plants time to absorb moisture before the heat of the day. If you constantly forget to water (it happens), an automatic watering system can do the work for you. Let's face it: life gets busy!

Good Things Take Thyme

You won't wake up tomorrow with a full garden, so take your time and trust the process—it's a journey, not a race. Some plants sprout in days, while others take weeks to flourish. But trust us, there's joy in every stage, from that first tiny green sprout pushing through the soil to your veggies being finally ripe for picking. Enjoy the process, embrace the dirt under your nails and celebrate the small victories (like keeping anything alive). Before you know it, your backyard will be full of fresh produce, fragrant flowers and blooming with love!

Let's Get Growing!

Starting your own backyard garden is one of the most rewarding ways to connect with nature, nourish yourself and create something beautiful—and it's right outside your door. So, why wait? Get planting, and remember, with the right tools and care, you can always bloom where you're planted! ●

Your OB/GYN

A Lifelong Partner in Women's Health



Thank you to Dr. John Monk of the Franciscan Physician Network Crown Point Health Center, who partnered with us to bring you this article.

As women move through the stages of life, their healthcare needs shift, requiring specialized attention even after childbearing years. Many women mistakenly believe that once they've had children, their need for obstetric and gynecologic care can lessen. However, this misconception can lead to overlooked health issues that could be managed—or even prevented—with ongoing care.

Dr. John Monk, a board-certified obstetrician and gynecologist at Franciscan Physician Network Crown Point Health Center, emphasizes the importance of maintaining a consistent relationship with an OB/GYN throughout a woman's life. "Whether it's menstrual cycle issues, vaginal problems or breast health issues, there's a whole spectrum of women's health problems that are sometimes difficult to talk about or that drastically affect people's daily lives," Dr. Monk explains. "It's very important, not only during pregnancy, to get regular obstetric care, but also seeing a gynecologist once a year for well-woman breast and pelvic examinations is really important."

The Trust Factor: A Continuum of Care

One of the most reassuring aspects of this journey is having continuity of care by staying with the same healthcare provider. This ongoing relationship builds trust, creating a safe space to discuss sensitive topics. For example, a woman who continues regular check-ups after childbirth may benefit from early detection of potential issues like thyroid problems, hormonal imbalances or even pre-cancerous conditions.

Dr. Monk highlights this aspect: "Women's health issues are a sensitive topic and can be emotionally challenging. Fostering privacy, trust and safety in a clinical environment to express sometimes sensitive topics is really important."

OB/GYNs: Not Just for Pregnancy

While obstetric care is vital, an OB/GYN's expertise extends far beyond pregnancy and childbirth. Women often find themselves returning to their OB/GYN for help with irregular menstrual cycles, fertility planning or managing symptoms like pelvic pain. In middle age, issues such as breast irregularities, cardiovascular risk and colon cancer screening often become more relevant.

"Having established care throughout a woman's health span in general is important, not just when they're young and having children," Dr. Monk says. "Things tend to change in women's 30s, 40s and 50s, with issues like menstrual health, breast cancer, cardiovascular risk and lab evaluations."

Routine Gynecologic Care: A Lifelong Necessity

Routine gynecologic care is essential, starting as early as the teenage years. For instance, a young woman experiencing irregular periods or painful cycles can benefit greatly from early intervention. As women age, annual check-ups continue to play a vital role in identifying changes and addressing concerns like pelvic pain or abnormal bleeding.

"The recommendation for pelvic examinations, Pap smears and cervical cancer screening starts at 21 years of age," Dr. Monk explains. "Seeing an OB/GYN every year in a woman's life is important. Most insurance covers yearly women's health examinations."

Addressing Changing Health Needs: Problem-Based Gynecology

Women's health concerns evolve over time, and proactive care ensures these needs are met. For example, in their 20s and 30s, women often seek help with family planning, menstrual health and managing infections. In their 40s and 50s, the focus may shift to managing perimenopausal symptoms, addressing heavy menstrual bleeding or seeking treatment for urinary incontinence.

"Menopausal issues, perimenopausal symptoms and postmenopausal concerns, such as urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse, also arise due to declining estrogen levels," Dr. Monk explains. He emphasizes that even throughout all these life stages, "breast health remains a critical concern, with routine mammogram screenings and breast examinations being essential."

Menopause Management: Navigating the Transition

Menopause brings unique challenges, and the symptoms vary widely from woman to woman. Some women may experience manageable hot flashes that resolve on their own, while others find symptoms like sleep disturbances or mood changes significantly affect their quality of life. Many treatment options, from lifestyle changes to prescription medications, can help.

"About 50% of women have significant, debilitating menopause symptoms that don't resolve over time," Dr. Monk notes. "There's a wide range of treatments available to help women through this transition."

Wellness Exams: Prioritizing Self-Care

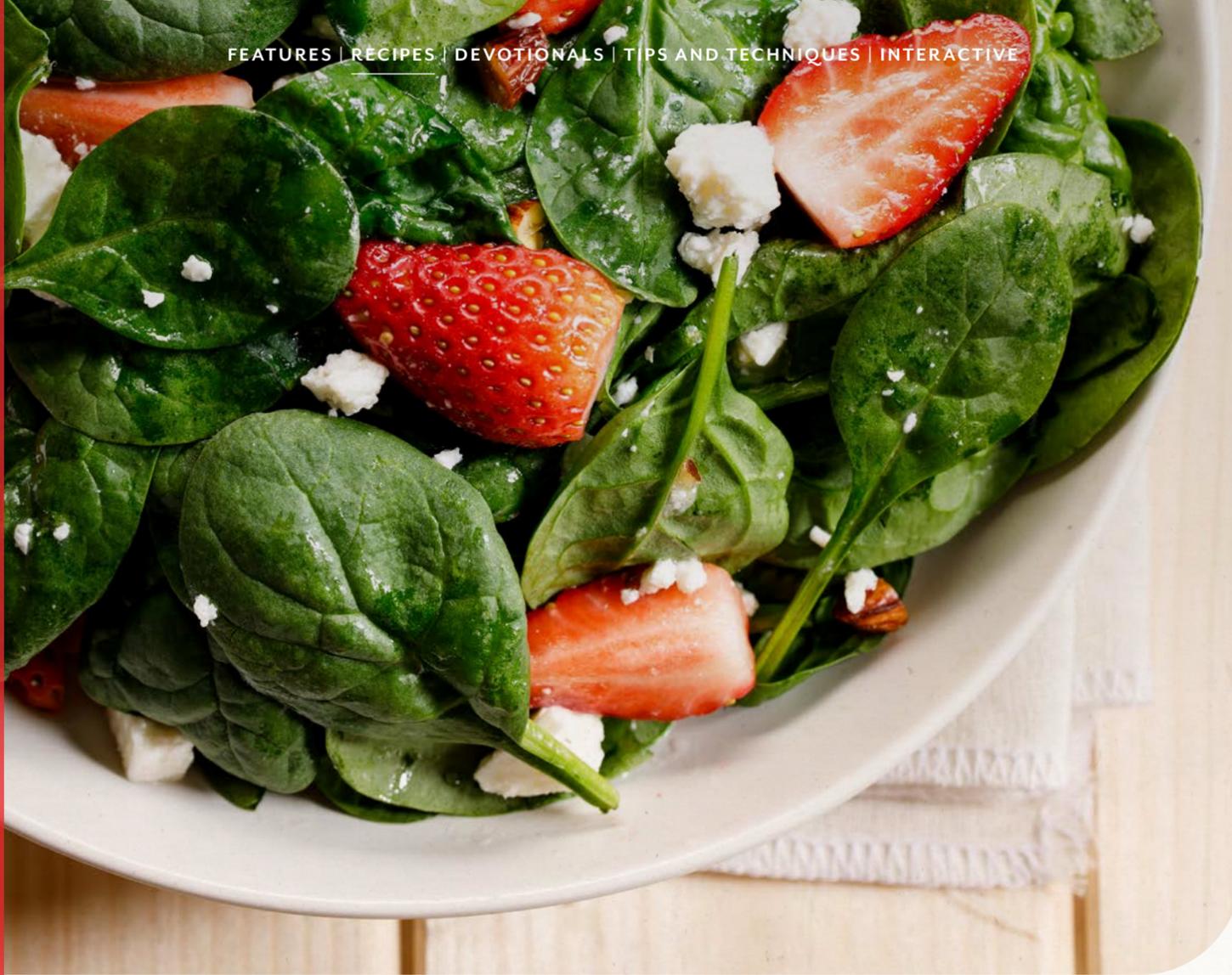
In the hustle of daily life, it is easy to find yourself putting your personal health at the bottom of your priority list. However, wellness exams are a simple yet essential way to ensure long-term well-being. Routine visits often lead to early detection of issues, whether it's a breast lump, signs of osteoporosis or cardiovascular risk factors.

Dr. Monk reminds women, "In general, mothers and women tend to be the center and the rocks of a lot of families. And women tend to forget about self-care and preventative healthcare. I think it's important that we remember to make ourselves a priority in our lives."

A Faithful Approach to Health

For women of faith, maintaining health is not just a physical necessity but also a spiritual responsibility. Our bodies are temples, and caring for them is an act of stewardship. Regular OB/GYN visits, embracing the continuum of care and staying informed about health changes are all ways to honor the bodies God has given us.

By prioritizing their health, women can flourish as the heart of their families and communities—living with purpose, guided by faith and strengthened by the confidence that comes from being informed and empowered. ●



The GOAT Strawberry Spinach Salad

PREP TIME: 10 minutes

TOTAL TIME: 20 minutes

SERVES: 6

Celebrate the GOAT of spring salads this Mother's Day with our Strawberry Spinach Salad! Featuring creamy goat cheese, juicy strawberries and a hint of sweetness, it's the greatest of all time dish to show Mom how much she means to you. It's fresh, vibrant and full of love—just like her!

Ingredients

- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup apple cider vinegar
- 2 Tb. sesame seeds
- ¼ tsp. paprika
- ¼ tsp. Worcestershire sauce (gluten-free)
- 4 oz. goat cheese, crumbled
- 2 cups strawberries, sliced
- 1 bag of baby spinach

Directions

- 1 | **IN A SAUCEPAN**, heat sugar, olive oil and vinegar until the sugar melts.
- 2 | **MIX IN SESAME SEEDS**, paprika and Worcestershire sauce.
- 3 | **IN A LARGE BOWL**, place spinach, strawberries and goat cheese.
- 4 | **ONCE THE DRESSING IS COOLED**, pour over the top of the spinach mixture and toss.
- 5 | **SERVE IMMEDIATELY.**

Berry Lemonade Spritzer

Berries are packed with antioxidants, and lemon adds a refreshing tang.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup of mixed berries (strawberries, blueberries, raspberries)
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 Tb. agave syrup
- Sparkling water

Directions:

Blend the berries and strain the juice. Mix the berry juice with lemon juice and agave syrup. Pour over ice and top with sparkling water.

Ginger Peach Iced Tea

Green tea is known for its antioxidants, and ginger adds a spicy kick that's great for digestion.

Ingredients:

- 2 peaches
- 1-in. piece of fresh ginger
- 2 bags of green tea
- 1 Tb. honey
- Water

Directions:

Brew the tea and let it cool. Blend the peaches and ginger, then strain the juice. Mix the peach-ginger juice with the cooled tea and honey. Serve over ice.

Refreshing Summer Drinks With a Healthy Twist

Cucumber Mint Cooler

This drink is hydrating and low in calories, making it perfect for a hot summer day.

Ingredients:

- 1 cucumber, blended
- Handful of fresh mint leaves
- 1 Tb. honey
- Juice of 1 lime
- Sparkling water

Directions:

Blend the cucumber and strain the juice. Mix the cucumber juice with honey and lime juice. Pour over ice, top with sparkling water and garnish with mint leaves.

Watermelon Basil Refresher

Watermelon is rich in vitamins A and C, and basil adds a unique flavor with bonus health benefits.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups watermelon, cubed
- Handful of fresh basil leaves
- 1 Tb. lime juice
- Pinch of salt
- Sparkling water

Directions:

Blend the watermelon and strain the juice. Muddle the basil leaves in a glass, add the watermelon juice, lime juice and a pinch of salt. Pour over ice and top with sparkling water.



ASK AN EXPERT

Dermatology

Richard A Federspiel, MD
Franciscan Physician Network Dermatology West Lafayette

1. How can I prevent wrinkles and fine lines?

Use sunscreen daily, moisturize and incorporate retinoids or peptides into your skincare routine. A healthy diet, hydration and avoiding smoking also help maintain youthful skin.

2. What's the best way to treat acne as an adult?

Use a gentle cleanser, non-comedogenic moisturizer and products with salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide. Prescription options like retinoids or hormonal treatments may be necessary for persistent breakouts.

3. How do I get rid of dark spots and hyperpigmentation?

Daily SPF is key to preventing dark spots from worsening. Treatments like vitamin C, retinoids, chemical peels and laser therapy can help fade them over time.

4. What's the best skincare routine for sensitive skin?

Stick to fragrance-free, gentle cleansers and moisturizers with soothing ingredients like ceramides and aloe. Avoid harsh exfoliants, alcohol-based toners and overusing active ingredients.

5. How can I tell if a mole is concerning?

Follow the ABCDE rule: Asymmetry, Border irregularity, Color changes, Diameter larger than a pencil eraser and Evolution over time. If a mole looks suspicious, see a dermatologist immediately.

6. What's the best way to treat under-eye circles?

Causes vary, but hydration, sleep and topical treatments with caffeine or vitamin C can help. For persistent concerns, dermatologists may recommend fillers or laser treatments.

7. How often should I exfoliate my skin?

For most skin types, two to three times a week is ideal. Over-exfoliating can cause irritation and dryness, so listen to your skin and adjust as needed.

8. What products should I avoid during pregnancy?

Avoid retinoids, high-dose salicylic acid, hydroquinone and certain essential oils. Stick to gentle, pregnancy-safe ingredients like niacinamide, hyaluronic acid and mineral sunscreens.

9. How can I reduce redness and rosacea flare-ups?

Use gentle, fragrance-free skincare and avoid triggers like spicy foods, alcohol and extreme temperatures. Prescription treatments and laser therapy can also help manage rosacea.

10. What's the best way to hydrate dry skin?

Use a thick, fragrance-free moisturizer with ceramides, hyaluronic acid and glycerin. Apply right after showering, and use a humidifier in dry environments.



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Taking control of your health can feel overwhelming. Franciscan is making that step simple! If you meet the age and risk factor recommendations, take advantage of our exclusive combination health screenings. NO PHYSICIAN REFERRAL NEEDED.



These prices are out-of-pocket costs and for the promotional screening program only. Check or credit card accepted. For individuals who may qualify for Medicare or wish to go through insurance, there is a different process that your provider can go through with you. Those who qualify for a lung scan also qualify for the abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) vascular screening for an additional \$10. The AAA vascular screening uses an ultrasound to detect a bulge in the aorta, the main blood vessel that runs from your heart down through your torso. A bulge may indicate a weakness in the aorta artery wall.

Glowing Made *Simple* Skincare Routine for All Ages

Let's face it—life is busy. Between work, family, cleaning, laundry and well ... you get the picture. It's all too easy to let caring for yourself fall to the bottom of your priorities, especially when it comes to your skin. Here is the deal—skincare doesn't have to be complicated or expensive, and it doesn't have to feel like another chore on your never-ending list. Think of it as "you" time—a moment to wash off the day, reset your morning and glow!

1. Cleanser

Wash Like You Mean It

Washing your face is skincare 101—removing dirt, sweat and makeup. Use a gentle, fragrance-free cleanser that won't strip your skin every morning and night. Massage it in for 30 seconds—use this time to prepare for your day to come or reflect on the day that is just ending.

Quick Tip: Lukewarm water is your skin's best friend. Too hot of water can dry your skin out and make it feel tight—not in a good way.

2. Toner

The Glow Boost You Are Missing

Toners have a bad reputation, but today's formulas aren't the stinging astringents you may remember from the past. They help balance your skin and prep it to soak in all the good stuff that comes next. Look for calming ingredients like aloe or rose water, especially if you have sensitive skin.

Bonus: Keep it in the fridge for an extra refreshing experience!

3. Serum

Individualized Care for Your Skin

Packed with active ingredients, serums zero in on specific concerns like dullness, dryness and fine lines. Vitamin C brightens, hyaluronic acid hydrates and niacinamide helps with... well, pretty much everything.

Picture This: Cleansing sets the stage, toner preps the skin, serum does the heavy lifting and then the next step, moisturizer, ties everything together with a smooth finish.

4. Moisturizer

Lock in Hydration

Even if you have oily skin, you still need moisturizer. It helps lock in hydration and keeps your skin barrier strong. Lightweight gels work for oily skin and creamy moisturizers are great for dry skin. To smooth fine lines, grab a moisturizer with retinol and collagen.

Mindful Moment: As you apply, pause. Take a deep breath. Thank God for this day, even if it has been a mess—especially if it has been a mess.

5. Sun Protection

Even on the Cloudy Days

Using a broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher keeps your skin protected from damage—and yes, wrinkles too. If you do nothing else, wear sunscreen! UV rays don't care if it's cloudy, cold or if you're just running a quick errand. Bonus points if you use a moisturizer with SPF—then you get to skip this step!

Faith Connection: Just like faith shields your heart, sunscreen shields your skin. Protection is powerful.

6. Extra Credit (But Only If You Want To)

Exfoliate: One to two times a week, buff away dead skin with a gentle exfoliant. No need to scrub like you're sanding a table—gentleness is key.

Face Masks: These are for when you want to feel fancy or need a 10-minute escape from reality. Hydrating, calming or clay masks can give your skin (and mood) a little boost. Plus, the peel-off masks are super satisfying.

Nourish: Your skin loves water, sleep, healthy foods and less stress—easier said than done, right? But every small step counts. A peaceful heart often shines through a glowing face.

Your skin tells your story. Laugh lines? Signs of joy. Freckles? Sun-kissed memories. Uneven blemishes? Just part of being human. Care for your skin, not to chase perfection but to celebrate the life it reflects.

*"You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you."
Song of Solomon 4:7 (NIV)*



Birth *Your Way*

From Natural Birth to Cesareans and Everything in Between

Welcome to the incredible journey of childbirth, a divine testament to the strength and beauty intricately woven into the fabric of womanhood. In this exploration, we delve into different birth methods, each a reflection of the marvelous design with which God has endowed women to bring new life into the world. From the timeless rituals of natural births to the precision of Cesarean sections, the soothing waters of birthing pools to the comforting embrace of home births, each method carries its own story, challenges and triumphs. This journey through the myriad options available to expectant mothers is not just about the hows, but also the whys behind each birthing choice—celebrating the extraordinary resilience, grace and strength bestowed upon women.

Traditional Vaginal Birth

Let's talk about traditional vaginal birth—the classic and natural way to welcome your baby into the world. For those with a healthy pregnancy, it's often the safest choice, and it typically allows for a quicker recovery too—on average, six weeks. There's a bonus for

your baby as well: as they pass through the birth canal, they get a natural dose of beneficial bacteria, referred to as vaginal seeding. It aids in building a strong immune system right from the start. There are a variety of birthing positions to choose from, like squatting, lying on your side or even on your hands and knees. Comfort and safety for mom and baby is of utmost importance. Don't be afraid to test out all of the possible positions, but be sure to discuss any decision-making with your obstetrician. If needed, there are helpful interventions available. Plus, you're not limited in location—a hospital or birthing center. Vaginal births are typically safe for low-risk pregnancies, however, keep in mind that there are exceptions (e.g., breech presentation or placenta previa) where alternative delivery methods may be safer.

Cesarean Section (C-Section)

Cesarean sections, mostly performed in hospitals, play a crucial role in safeguarding the health of both mother and baby in specific medical scenarios. A C-section is a surgical procedure

to deliver the baby through incisions in the abdomen and uterus. It's essential to recognize that this surgical approach, while frequently employed, comes with its own unique recovery journey. Typically, the healing process for a C-section is two weeks longer than a vaginal delivery, provided there are no complications. Notable aspects of this procedure include the resultant scar and that a previous C-section may influence your future birth options, possibly ruling out a vaginal birth later on. The decision to opt for a C-section can be elective, based on personal preference and medical guidance, or it may be a necessary intervention in emergencies. Your obstetrician may recommend a C-section if the baby is breech, the baby's oxygen levels are dropping or there are decelerations in the baby's heartbeat. It is important to note that the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) does not support elective primary C-sections without medical indications, as vaginal births are generally safer when no complications are present.

Pain Management

When it comes to managing pain during labor and delivery, there's a spectrum of options tailored to suit different comfort levels and birthing plans. For those leaning towards a more natural experience, techniques such as breathing exercises, meditation and the support of a doula can be incredibly effective. Water therapy and movement, like walking or swaying, also play a significant role in natural pain management. On the other hand, if you're open to medical interventions, epidurals are a popular choice for pain relief, providing significant comfort while allowing you to stay alert and engaged. Epidurals can carry potential risks, such as hypotension, longer labor in some cases and an increased need for instrumental delivery. Other medical options include IV pain medications and local anesthetics. It's important to have a thorough discussion with your obstetrician about these options, as each comes with its own set of considerations and can be adapted to fit your personal birth plan and pain tolerance.

Using a Certified Nurse Midwife

Certified Nurse Midwives (CNMs) offer a unique and nurturing approach to pregnancy and delivery. CNMs are advanced practice registered nurses with specialized training in midwifery. They provide comprehensive care before, during and after pregnancy, including labor support, delivery and postpartum

follow-up. Known for their patient-centered philosophy, CNMs often foster a deep sense of trust and partnership with the women they serve. Unlike OB-GYNs—who are medical doctors trained to manage both routine and high-risk pregnancies, including surgical interventions—CNMs typically care for women with low-risk pregnancies. Their care model emphasizes natural birth and emotional support while still integrating with the broader medical team when needed.

This collaborative approach allows women to experience the best of both worlds—holistic support and medical expertise.

Using a Doula

Enlisting the support of a doula during labor and delivery can be a game-changer for many expectant mothers, offering a blend of emotional support, physical comfort and valuable knowledge. Doulas are trained professionals who provide non-medical support and guidance, helping to create a more empowering and positive birthing experience. They are known for their nurturing presence, offering techniques for pain relief—such as massage and positioning—and for being a calming voice of encouragement throughout the birthing process. A doula's role also includes providing information and advocacy, ensuring that the medical team communicates and respects your preferences. Their continuous support can significantly reduce anxiety, lower the likelihood of medical interventions and even

shorten labor duration. Whether you're planning your delivery for a hospital, birthing center or at home, a doula can be an invaluable ally in your journey, especially if you're aiming for a more natural and personalized birthing experience.

Laboring in Water

Immersion in water during the first stage of labor is gaining popularity as a way to ease discomfort and promote relaxation. The ACOG acknowledges that water immersion during this phase may shorten labor and reduce the need for epidural analgesia, making it an appealing option for many women. If you're considering this approach, facilities with properly maintained tubs can provide a safe and soothing environment during labor. However, it's important to ensure that the facility has clear protocols for monitoring mom and baby and for addressing any complications that may arise.

Medical Interventions

During labor and delivery, various medical interventions and evidence-based tools used to promote the health of the mother and baby are available to manage labor and ensure the well-being of each patient. It's vital to educate yourself about these options beforehand. Understanding what each intervention entails, its potential benefits and risks, empowers you to make informed decisions without feeling pressured during labor.

Roughly 2/3 of women agreed they DID NOT have the knowledge and tools needed for a positive birth experience.

CONTINUE READING ▶▶▶



Balancing the benefits and risks of these medical interventions is key, and it's essential to have open discussions with your obstetrician to align your birth plan with the safest and most comfortable approach for your situation. Here are some interventions that you may want to discuss with your provider:

DURING LABOR:

Membrane Sweeping

A procedure where a healthcare provider gently separates the amniotic sac from the area around the cervix. This can stimulate hormones and may lead to the onset of labor.

Pro: Can naturally induce labor, potentially avoiding the need for chemical induction.

Con: May cause discomfort, irregular contractions and slight bleeding.

Artificial Rupture of Membranes (AROM)

Also known as breaking the water, this involves making a small opening in the amniotic sac to induce or accelerate labor.

Pro: Can speed up labor if it's progressing slowly, reducing the overall duration.

Con: Increases the risk of infection and may lead to fetal distress.

IV Fluids and Medications

Intravenous fluids can be given for hydration and energy during labor. Additional medications may be used to manage pain or enhance contractions.

Pro: Provides essential hydration and can effectively manage pain and strengthen contractions.

Con: This may lead to excessive fluid intake and potential side effects from medications.

Pitocin or Oxytocin

These hormones are used to induce labor or strengthen contractions if labor is not progressing effectively.

Pro: Effectively induces or strengthens contractions, aiding in labor progression.

Con: Can cause overly strong and painful contractions, potentially stressing the baby.

Epidural or Spinal Block

An epidural and a spinal block are forms of regional anesthesia used to manage pain during labor. With an epidural, anesthesia is injected into the epidural space. With a spinal, the anesthesia is injected into the dural sac that contains cerebrospinal fluid, which provides instant pain relief.

Pro: Offers significant pain relief, allowing for a more comfortable labor experience.

Con: This can lead to a drop in blood pressure and may prolong labor or lead to a need for further interventions.

DURING DELIVERY:

Assisted Vaginal Delivery

This includes the use of instruments like forceps or a vacuum extractor to help deliver the baby, often used when the baby is in distress or the mother is unable to push the baby out.

Pro: Helpful in difficult deliveries, ensuring the safe delivery of the baby.

Con: Can cause trauma to both the mother and baby and increases the risk of perineal tears.

Episiotomy

A surgical cut made in the perineum (the area between the vagina and anus) to enlarge the vaginal opening for delivery. This practice is less common now and is usually only done if necessary for the baby's safe delivery.

Pro: It may be necessary to quickly deliver the baby in cases of distress or to avoid severe perineal tearing.

Con: Involves a surgical cut that can lead to longer recovery and potential complications.

C-Section

A surgical procedure to deliver the baby through incisions in the abdomen and uterus, used when vaginal delivery is not safe or possible.

Pro: Essential in certain situations for the safety of mother and baby, such as in breech births or fetal distress.

Con: Longer recovery time, risk of surgical complications and potential impact on future pregnancies.

Postpartum Recovery and Care

Postpartum recovery and care is a crucial phase of any birth that varies depending on the birth method. For vaginal deliveries, recovery often involves managing soreness and healing of the perineal area, while C-sections require care for surgical incisions and a longer rest period. Beyond physical healing, it's essential to focus on the mother's mental health, as this period can be both emotionally overwhelming and joyous. It is especially important to educate yourself on the signs and symptoms of postpartum depression and anxiety and that you attend your six-week follow-up appointment, where you will take a postpartum mental health screening. Postpartum care includes professional support for potential challenges like postpartum depression, breastfeeding difficulties and adapting to new routines with the baby. Hospitals, birthing centers and community programs often provide resources like lactation consultants, support groups and follow-up health checks. This support network is invaluable, offering guidance, reassurance and a listening ear, ensuring that new mothers don't just survive but thrive in their new role, both physically and emotionally.

SOURCE: AMERICAN COLLEGE OF OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY (ACOG)

We have journeyed through the myriad of childbirth methods, highlighting the unique aspects and considerations of each. From the natural intimacy of vaginal births to the medical precision of C-sections, the gentle waters of a laboring pool to the empowering presence of a doula, we've explored the diverse avenues available to expecting mothers. Central to this exploration is the importance of informed choice—understanding that each woman's birth experience is personal, sacred and should align with her health needs, personal values and comfort level. To future mothers, dive deeper! Research and consult with healthcare professionals! Embrace the journey of motherhood with knowledge, confidence and the support of a caring community. Remember, the path to bringing new life into the world is as unique as the child you are about to meet, and being well-informed is your first step towards a fulfilling and safe birthing experience.



For more information or to talk through your labor and birth options, contact your Franciscan OB/GYN or Franciscan's FertilityCare Center.

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