Parturition Encyclopedia Article

Parturition

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Parturition

Parturition is a term that refers to labor and birth. More information on birth may be found by looking under that term. Mammals in general and humans in particular give birth to living young. Accordingly, the procedure of bringing forth an infant from the uterus (womb) has been with human society as long as there have been humans.

Because birth involves great changes in the biology of the newborn and a significant change in the uterus, there is potential hazard associated with the process. The large placenta with a diameter of 6-8 in (15-20 cm) is physically separated from the richly vascular uterus. The separation process causes a potential hazard for maternal hemorrhage. The cervical opening of the uterus must dilate to about 4 in (10 cm) to permit passage of the baby's head to the exterior. The birth canal is subject to tears and or other damage. In a very brief time, the respiration of the newborn must change from oxygenated blood provided to the fetus by the umbilical veins of the placental circulation to oxygenation by blood passing through the baby's lungs.

Ordinarily in the United States, parturition occurs in the safety of a hospital under the supervision of a trained physician or midwife. However, this is a relatively recent development because, up until the early part of this century, childbirth generally occurred at home. Women were attended by midwives who had acquired informal knowledge to assist in childbirth. While midwifery was recognized in ancient Greece and Rome and is referred to in the Old Testament (Exodus 1.15-22), midwives of the time lacked proper training and there was considerable mortality to both mother and infant. However, more recently, nurse midwifery programs have been established in universities in the United States and elsewhere. Admission to midwifery programs typically requires being a registered nurse and having a college degree. The graduate program in midwifery is two very intense years of training. It is not surprising that infant and maternal mortality associated with parturition has plummeted.