Pregnancy during the pandemic: What to do if a loved one can't be with you during labor and delivery

During the pandemic, we've all had to adopt "social distancing" to protect ourselves and our communities. This creates unique challenges when you're pregnant. In addition to doing what you can to safeguard your own health and that of your baby, you may be in the unexpected situation of having to go through labor and delivery without a loved one being present, or not having family be able to visit you when the baby is born. Your access to prenatal care, childbirth preparation classes and your chosen delivery hospital may have changed. This time might be especially challenging if you're also faced with other stresses, mental health concerns or reminders of difficult past experiences.

If this happens, here are some ideas about how to manage the stress:

Reach out to VA resources for information and support

- Maternity Care Coordinator
- Women's Mental Health Champion
- Women Veterans Program Manager

Find ways to communicate

- Keep in close touch with your VA Maternity Care Coordinator. She can help you navigate changes in the health care environment.
- To reach your VA providers, you can use Secure Messaging in MyHealtheVet. You can also request phone or video visits with your VA providers.
- If your non-VA providers (for example, obstetrician or midwife) have secure email services, consider signing up so you can get messages and questions to them quickly.
- Reach out to loved ones for video chats on a smartphone or tablet that you can bring with you to a labor and delivery room.
- Consider online or phone-based resources, such as VA Mindfulness Coach phone app.

Plan ahead

- Pack in advance what you'll need to bring with your during labor and delivery. Remember to pack a charger for your phone or tablet.
- Identify things that will help you to relax, and plan to bring them with you. Here are some examples:
  - Pictures of loved ones, including pets
  - Favorite music or soothing sounds
  - Post-its or notecards with encouraging statements
- Be aware of what may cause you the most distress during labor or postpartum and find out your options ahead of time. Here are some examples:
  - If you're concerned about pain, or being drowsy or immobile because of pain medications, ask about options
  - If it upsets you to lie on your back, ask if you can deliver in another position, such as squatting
  - If you sometimes take "as needed" anti-anxiety medication, ask if it's okay to take it during labor
  - If you're wondering about the safety of breastfeeding or have concerns about caring for the baby, choose a pediatrician and ask questions before your baby is born.
- Consider writing down requests and preferences to share with hospital staff when you arrive

Use strategies during labor

- Let providers know when you're feeling upset and ask for help
- Take slow breaths in and short, firm breaths out
- Imagine a relaxing or happy scene; focus your attention on it
- Scan your body for muscles that are tensed; squeeze them tightly for a few seconds, then let go to release the tension
- Repeat phrases (aloud or to yourself) that help you feel confident and supported (e.g., "One contraction at a time," "I can do this")

It's normal to feel anxious about the current situation and to experience feelings of loss and grief about disruptions to your plans. Though your experience may be different than what you had hoped or planned, you can get through it and your providers are here to help.