

What is a Midwife?



Midwives in the United States provide health care services to women of all ages. Midwife means “with woman.” Midwives partner with women to help make important health decisions. Midwives work with other members of a woman’s health care team when needed, but a midwife may also be your primary care provider. There are 3 main types of midwives, and there are some differences in the services offered by each type of midwife.

What types of midwives are there?

The 3 main types of midwives in the United States are:

Certified nurse-midwives (CNMs)

Have a college degree in nursing and a master’s degree in nurse-midwifery. CNMs are registered nurses (RNs) who have graduated from an accredited nurse-midwifery education program and passed a national certification exam. They must have a license to practice midwifery in the state where they work. CNMs work in all health care settings including hospitals, birth centers, and offices or clinics. CNMs provide general women’s health care throughout a woman’s lifetime, and they can prescribe most medications.

Certified midwives (CMs)

Are midwives with a bachelor’s degree in a field other than nursing and a master’s degree. They have the same midwifery education and pass the same national certification exam as CNMs. CMs must have a license to practice midwifery in the state where they work. CMs provide the same services and work in the same settings as CNMs.

Certified professional midwives (CPMs)

May have apprenticeship training, or they may graduate from an accredited formal education program. CPMs take a national certification exam that is not the same as the one CNMs and CMs take. The health care services provided by CPMs are not as broad as those of CNMs and CMs. CPMs provide pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care for women outside of the hospital—often in birth centers and homes. CPMs are not able to prescribe most medications, and they do not work in hospitals.

Most of the midwives in the United States are CNMs. CNMs are licensed in all 50 states. Not all states license CMs and CPMs.

What do midwives do?

All 3 types of midwives provide care to women during pregnancy, labor, birth, and the postpartum period. CNMs and CMs also provide general health services, annual checkups, contraception (birth control), menopausal care, and treatment for common infections and health problems. CNMs and CMs care for about one of every 10 women who give birth each year in the United States. Most of these births are in hospitals. All 3 types of midwives care for women who have their babies in birth centers or at home, and CNMs and CMs also work in hospitals.

Why would I choose a midwife for care during my pregnancy?

Midwives view pregnancy and birth as normal life events that can be a healthy time in your life. Midwives are experts in knowing the difference between normal changes that occur and symptoms that require extra attention. Midwives specialize in providing support and education in addition to regular health care. They use evidence-based medical procedures when there is a specific concern for the health of you or your baby, and they work in partnership with physicians who can be available if needed. Midwives offer health care that respects the goals and choices of each individual woman and family.

What if I have a high-risk pregnancy or complication during labor?

Your CNM or CM can prescribe medicine, order tests, and provide treatment for common illnesses that you might get during pregnancy. Midwives work with physicians who specialize in complications of pregnancy. If you have a medical problem during pregnancy or complication during labor, your midwife will work with a



physician to make sure you get the best and safest care for you and your baby. Midwives do not perform surgery. If you need to have a cesarean birth, the surgery will be done by the physician who works with your midwife. Your midwife will also work with other health care providers: nurses, social workers, nutritionists, doulas, childbirth educators, physical therapists, and other specialists to help you get the care you need.

What if I want pain medicine during labor?

Your midwife will help you make decisions about how you are going to cope with your labor. If you want medicine to cope with pain during labor, your midwife can help you get medicine that is available in the setting where you give birth. Midwives also know other ways help women cope with labor such as changing positions or being in a tub of water. These can be helpful in addition to pain medications.

Questions to Ask When Choosing a Midwife for Your Care during Pregnancy and Birth

Questions to ask any midwife

- If you work in a group, who will attend my birth?
- Who attends births for you when you are away?
- What kind of childbirth preparation do you recommend?
- Do you provide labor support and stay with women throughout labor?
- How do you feel about doulas or family and friends being with me during labor?
- Do you allow moving around and eating or drinking during labor?
- Can I hold my baby right after birth, breastfeed, and not be separated?
- When do you recommend IVs, fetal heart rate monitoring, Pitocin, or episiotomy?
- Do you care for women who want a vaginal birth after a previous cesarean birth?
- How much do you charge? Is your care paid for by my insurance?

Questions to ask midwives who attend births in homes and birth centers

- Am I eligible to give birth in this setting?
- What equipment and drugs do you have?
- How do you handle problems during labor?
- When would we go to the hospital?
- Which hospital will I go to if a problem occurs during labor? How will I get there?
- How often do women in your practice go to the hospital during labor?
- Do you have a formal agreement with a physician to provide care if problems occur?
- Would you stay with me if we go to the hospital?
- Are you trained in newborn resuscitation?
- Will you visit me at home after my baby is born?

For More Information

Our Moment of Truth: What Is a Midwife?

<http://www.ourmomentoftruth.com/What-is-a-Midwife>

Midwives Alliance of North America: What Is a Midwife?

<http://mana.org/about-midwives/what-is-a-midwife>

Childbirth Connection: Choosing a Caregiver

<http://www.childbirthconnection.org/article.asp?ClickedLink=247&ck=10158&area=27>

Our Bodies, Ourselves: Choosing a Maternity Care Provider

<http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/health-info/choosing-a-maternity-care-provider/>

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