

NextGen: HN unit specification

Physiological Adaptations and Wellbeing in the Perinatal Period (SCQF level 7)

Unit code: JGRT 47

SCQF level: 7 (16 SCQF credit points)

Valid from: August 2026

This unit specification provides detailed information about the unit to ensure consistent and transparent assessment year on year. It is for lecturers and assessors, and contains all the mandatory information you need to deliver and assess the unit.

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Unit purpose

This unit introduces learners to the anatomical and physiological adaptations that occur during pregnancy, birth, and the postnatal period. Learners examine how these changes support the health and development of the pregnant individual and the newborn. The unit also introduces common perinatal health conditions and congenital variations, supporting learners' ability to recognise and understand deviations from expected term development.

Learners explore fetal development, from conception through to the physiological changes that occur immediately after birth. They understand antenatal screening processes for the pregnant individual and foetus, with links to relevant health conditions.

Entry to the unit is at your centre's discretion. Learners should, however, have effective communication and interpersonal skills. They can demonstrate these with relevant qualifications at SCQF level 6 or experience of working in the health or social care sectors.

This is a mandatory unit in the Higher National Certificate (HNC) Healthcare Practice: Perinatal Care pathway. Learners can also complete it as a stand-alone unit for continuous professional development (CPD). Learners who complete the unit as part of HNC Healthcare Practice may have the opportunity to progress to further study, including Higher National Diploma (HND) or degree-level courses.

Unit outcomes

Learners who complete this unit can:

1. explain anatomical and physiological changes that occur in pregnancy, from conception to birth
2. explain the stages of fetal and newborn development
3. describe antenatal screening procedures
4. explain the physiological stages of labour and birth

Evidence requirements

Learners must provide knowledge evidence for these outcomes. This can be oral or written (or a combination of both) and captured in a range of media. We recommend that you take a holistic approach to assessing learners' evidence. They should demonstrate a broad understanding of the topics and concepts in the evidence requirements through knowledge, understanding and application. We expect learners to evidence learning across the knowledge and skills for each outcome. To successfully achieve these outcomes, learners must:

- describe the four phases of the menstrual cycle
- explain two key biological features involved in the process of conception
- explain two anatomical and two physiological changes that occur from conception to birth
- identify one key stage of embryonic or fetal development for each trimester of pregnancy
- explain two physiological changes that occur in the newborn immediately after birth, including their function
- explain two common antenatal screening tests, including one benefit and one limitation for each test
- explain two key features for each of the three physiological stages of labour
- describe the role of two hormones that regulate labour and birth
- identify two physical and two emotional signs of progression of labour
- describe two immediate postnatal physiological changes

Knowledge and skills

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 1 Learners should understand: • the menstrual cycle and the process of conception • hormonal changes during pregnancy, including human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), progesterone, oestrogen • anatomical changes in the reproductive, cardiovascular, respiratory, and musculoskeletal systems • the anatomy of breast and chest development and growth, including typical and atypical changes in pregnancy • physiological adaptations across each trimester • the role of the membranes, placenta and amniotic fluid	Outcome 1 Learners can: • describe the sequence of anatomical and physiological changes, from conception to birth • identify trimester-specific changes and their impact on the pregnant individual • explain the function of key hormones in pregnancy • use diagrams or models to illustrate changes in human anatomy during pregnancy • explain the role of the membranes, placenta and amniotic fluid

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 2 Learners should understand: - the stages of embryonic and fetal development across all three trimesters - key developmental milestones, such as organ formation, viability, growth patterns - expected term development and growth - the transition from intrauterine to extrauterine life - immediate physiological changes in the newborn (for example circulation, respiration) - newborn skin tone, muscle tone and reflexes - newborn behaviours, including feeding cues - common infant conditions, such as physiological jaundice, erythema toxicum, contact dermatitis	Outcome 2 Learners can: - identify key stages of embryonic and fetal development across all three trimesters - identify key developmental milestones and expected term growth across all three trimesters - identify major organ systems and their development timelines - explain physiological changes in the newborn, including circulatory and respiratory adaptations - recognise expected newborn behaviours, skin tone, muscle tone, reflexes and feeding cues - recognise common infant conditions, such as physiological jaundice, erythema toxicum, contact dermatitis
Outcome 3 Learners should understand: - the purpose and timing of routine antenatal screening - types of screening, for example ultrasound, blood tests, genetic screening - common screening programmes for pregnant adults, including infectious diseases and haemoglobinopathies - common fetal screening, for example fetal biometrics, Down's syndrome, spina bifida, cleft lip and palate - the benefits and limitations of screening - ethical considerations and informed consent	Outcome 3 Learners can: - describe the range of antenatal screening procedures - explain the rationale for each type of screening - explain possible findings from screening tests - discuss the importance of communication and consent in screening - explain the benefits and limitations of screening

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 4 Learners should understand: • the three stages of labour • hormonal regulation of labour for example oxytocin, prostaglandins • physical and emotional signs and progression of labour • immediate postnatal changes to the birthing person or woman • basic principles of safe and supportive birth care	Outcome 4 Learners can: • describe each stage of labour and associated physiological processes • identify signs of labour onset and progression • explain the role of hormones in labour and delivery • describe the immediate postnatal changes to the birthing person or woman • describe immediate care needs of the birthing person or woman • identify features of safe and supportive birth care

Meta-skills

You must give learners opportunities to develop their meta-skills throughout this unit. We have suggested how to incorporate the most relevant ones into the unit content, but you may find other opportunities.

Self-management

This includes focusing, integrity, adapting and initiative. The most relevant are:

- focusing:
 - researching and understanding the stages of pregnancy and development, through formative tasks and case studies
- integrity:
 - reflecting on ethical considerations in antenatal screening and maternal care
- adapting:
 - applying new knowledge from research and practice, to understand complex physiological processes
- initiative:
 - independently exploring current guidelines and best practices in perinatal care

Social intelligence

This includes communicating, feeling, collaborating and leading. The most relevant are:

- communicating:
 - engaging in discussions about sensitive topics, such as screening outcomes and labour experiences
- feeling:
 - developing empathy through understanding the emotional and physical experiences of pregnancy and birth
- collaborating:
 - working with peers to explore interprofessional roles in perinatal care and support systems

Innovation

This includes curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking. The most relevant are:

- curiosity:
 - investigating how fetal development is influenced by maternal health and environment
- creativity:
 - designing visual aids or models to represent stages of pregnancy and labour
- sense-making:
 - connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world perinatal care practices

- critical thinking:
 - analysing antenatal screening data and evaluating ethical implications

Literacies

This unit provides opportunities to develop the following literacies.

- academic writing and referencing, through written assignments
- the use of domain-specific language, such as anatomical and medical terminology
- understanding evidence-based literature by reviewing current research

Numeracy

Learners develop numeracy skills by:

- interpreting statistical data
- understanding gestational timelines and fetal growth measurements
- managing time-sensitive tasks

Communication

Learners develop communication skills by:

- participating in question-and-answer sessions; and small and large group discussions
- receiving and responding appropriately to verbal and non-verbal communication in the learning and care practice environments
- creating and responding to written and digital communications in the learning and care practice environments
- responding appropriately to sensitive topics in perinatal care
- creating written reports and presentations using appropriate referencing
- collaborating with others in simulated care planning or case study reviews

Digital

Learners develop digital skills by:

- using digital platforms to access information to support learning and understanding, including clinical guidelines and research
- using a PC or other devices to develop coherent portfolio and project work
- using digital platforms to engage with and collaborate with professionals and carers in the sector
- creating digital portfolios or presentations to demonstrate understanding
- engaging with online learning tools and simulations
- completing digital documentation in simulated environments

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you should encourage learners to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

This includes:

- a general understanding of social, economic and environmental sustainability
- a general understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- a deeper understanding of subject-specific sustainability
- the confidence to apply the skills, knowledge, understanding and values they develop in the next stage of their life

The sustainability goals that are most relevant for this unit are:

- SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing: ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages including:
 - reducing maternal mortality rates
 - ending preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age
 - reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment
 - promoting mental health and wellbeing
 - strengthening the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol
 - ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
 - providing universal health coverage, including financial risk protection
 - ensuring access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all
 - strengthening the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks

- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities: reducing inequalities including:
 - empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all
 - providing equal opportunity and reduced inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices
 - providing age and social protection policies to achieve equality
 - allowing safe migration and mobility of people

Delivery of unit

You can deliver this 2-credit unit as a mandatory unit in the HNC Healthcare Practice: Perinatal Care pathway or as a stand-alone unit for CPD.

When you deliver the unit as part of a qualification, you can integrate teaching, learning and assessment with other units.

The notional time for delivery and assessment is 80 hours. The amount of time you allocate to each outcome is at your discretion. We suggest the following distribution of time, including assessment:

Outcome 1 — Explain anatomical and physiological changes that occur in pregnancy from conception to birth (20 hours)

Outcome 2 — Explain the stages of fetal and newborn development (20 hours)

Outcome 3 — Describe antenatal screening procedures (20 hours)

Outcome 4 — explain the physiological stages of labour and birth (20 hours)

Additional guidance

The guidance in this section is not mandatory.

Content and context for this unit

This is a mandatory unit in the perinatal care pathway of HNC Healthcare Practice. You should deliver it over 80 hours. It is intended for learners who are interested in working in care settings or supporting women and individuals during the perinatal period. The unit provides essential underpinning knowledge of reproductive anatomy and physiology, enabling learners to contribute effectively to person-centred care. It also supports progression to higher education, including degree-level study in health and social care-related disciplines.

We expect learners to develop a clear understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the human reproductive system before exploring the changes that occur during pregnancy. This foundational knowledge supports learners to recognise how the body adapts, from conception through to birth.

Explain anatomical and physiological changes that occur in pregnancy from conception to birth (outcome 1)

Learners should begin by exploring the four phases of the menstrual cycle:

- menstrual
- follicular
- ovulation
- luteal

Learners should focus on the hormonal regulation and physiological changes that prepare the body for conception. This foundational understanding supports the study of conception, including the biological features of ovulation, fertilisation, and implantation, and their roles in initiating pregnancy. Following conception, learners should examine the hormonal changes that sustain pregnancy, with emphasis on

hCG, progesterone, and oestrogen. They should understand how these hormones influence the development of the placenta, maintain the uterine lining, and support fetal growth.

Learners should:

- study the anatomical and physiological changes that occur across the reproductive, cardiovascular, respiratory, musculoskeletal, and breast or chest systems
- identify how these systems adapt to meet the increasing demands of pregnancy, including both typical and atypical changes
- describe how these changes may affect the pregnant individual's health and wellbeing
- map how physiological changes progress across the three trimesters, identifying trimester-specific adaptations and their clinical significance
- explore the structure and function of the membranes, placenta and amniotic fluid
- explain how these structures support:
 - nutrient exchange
 - waste removal
 - hormonal signalling
 - fetal protection

Encourage learners to use diagrams, anatomical models, or digital tools to visualise and explain these changes, supporting their ability to communicate complex biological processes clearly and accurately. This visual and applied approach reinforces both knowledge and practical skills.

Throughout the unit, you should guide learners to use inclusive language, recognising that pregnancy can be experienced by women, transgender men, and non-binary individuals. You should foster sensitivity to the social, cultural, and individual contexts that shape how pregnancy is experienced and understood.

Explain the stages of fetal and newborn development (outcome 2)

Introduce learners to common infant conditions that may be observed in the early postnatal period, such as physiological jaundice, erythema toxicum, and contact dermatitis. They should recognise that these conditions are part of normal adaptation in many cases, while also understanding when further assessment may be required. Throughout this outcome, you should encourage learners to use inclusive and sensitive language, recognising that newborn care and development may be experienced differently across diverse family structures and cultural contexts.

Learners should begin by examining the stages of human development from conception to birth, distinguishing clearly between the embryonic stage (weeks 1 to 8) and the fetal stage (week 9 to birth). They should explore development across the three trimesters, with emphasis on key biological processes and milestones:

- First trimester: learners should focus on cell division, implantation, and organogenesis (formation of major organs). They should understand the significance of early milestones, such as the detection of a heartbeat and the formation of the neural tube.
- Second trimester: emphasise growth of organ systems, skeletal development, and the onset of fetal movement. Learners should understand the concept of viability and the development of sensory systems.
- Third trimester: explore organ maturation (especially lungs and brain), fat accumulation, and preparation for birth, including fetal positioning and immune system development.

As the focus shifts to the newborn, learners should examine the physiological transition from intrauterine to extrauterine life. This includes circulatory changes such as the closure of the ductus arteriosus and foramen ovale, and respiratory adaptations, such as the initiation of breathing and lung expansion. You should also cover thermoregulation, feeding initiation, and waste elimination. These changes are essential for survival and learners should understand them in the context of neonatal assessment and care. They should also study the newborn's appearance and behaviour, including typical skin tone, muscle tone, and reflexes such as the Moro, rooting, and sucking reflexes. Observing and interpreting newborn behaviours, such

as feeding cues, alertness, and sleep-wake cycles, helps learners understand early neurological development and wellbeing.

Describe antenatal screening procedures (outcome 3)

Learners should develop an understanding of the purpose and timing of routine antenatal screening, recognising that these tests are offered at specific stages of pregnancy to monitor the health and development of both the pregnant individual and the fetus. They should explore the different types of screening available, including ultrasound scans, blood tests, and genetic screening, and understand what each test is designed to detect. Common conditions screened for include:

- chromosomal abnormalities such as Down's syndrome
- neural tube defects like spina bifida
- maternal health indicators, such as anaemia and sexually transmitted infections

Learners should also explore two common antenatal screening tests, such as the nuchal translucency scan, combined screening, or anomaly scan, covering their purpose, timing, benefits, and limitations.

Learners should explain the benefits of antenatal screening, such as early detection of potential health issues, informed decision-making, and preparation for additional care or interventions. At the same time, they should critically consider the limitations of screening, including the possibility of false positives or negatives, the emotional impact of uncertain results, and the fact that screening does not provide a definitive diagnosis. You should discuss ethical considerations, particularly around informed consent, autonomy, and the right to accept or decline screening. Learners should understand that women and individuals may have different values, beliefs, or cultural perspectives that influence their decisions about screening, and that healthcare professionals have a responsibility to provide clear, unbiased information to support informed choices.

Throughout the outcome, you should encourage learners to use inclusive and sensitive language, recognising that not all pregnancies result in live births and that women and individuals may have diverse experiences with fertility, pregnancy loss,

and family structures. This topic should be approached with sensitivity and respect for diverse experiences and perspectives.

Explain the physiological stages of labour and birth (outcome 4)

Learners should develop a clear understanding of the physiological and hormonal processes involved in labour and birth. They should explore the process through a physiological lens, recognising it as a natural, instinctive process that unfolds uniquely for everyone. Learners should begin by studying the three recognised stages of labour:

- the first stage, which involves the onset of regular contractions and cervical dilation
- the second stage, which includes the descent and birth of the infant
- the third stage, which involves the delivery of the placenta

Learners should explore each stage in terms of its physical processes, variations of duration, and associated care needs. They should understand the three stages of labour not simply as clinical phases, but as part of a continuous journey that is influenced by hormones, emotional states, and the birthing environment.

Learners should also understand the role of key hormones such as oxytocin and prostaglandins in regulating labour, including how they influence uterine contractions, cervical ripening, and emotional bonding. In addition to the physiological aspects, learners should identify both physical signs (such as contractions, rupture of membranes, and cervical changes) and emotional signs (such as anxiety, withdrawal, or increased focus) that indicate the onset and progression of labour. They should examine the immediate postnatal period, with attention to the physiological changes that occur in the birthing person, such as uterine contraction and involution, lochia and initiation of lactation. You should introduce learners to the basic principles of safe and supportive birth care, including the importance of respectful communication, emotional reassurance, creating a calm, secure environment and the importance of trust in the birthing process. Learners should explore the importance of continuity, informed choice, and the creation of environments that support physiological birth.

Encourage learners to reflect on how their knowledge and attitudes can influence the experience of birth, and how they can contribute to care that honours the autonomy, dignity, and innate strength of those giving birth. This topic should be approached with sensitivity to the diverse experiences of birth, recognising that women and individuals may have different cultural, emotional, and physical needs during labour and the postnatal period.

Resources

There is a variety of media resources that you can use to support your delivery of the unit. In addition, learners' experiences in their practice placements can enhance their learning and application in the unit.

Approaches to delivery

We recommend that you deliver the unit through:

- lectures
- group work
- practical classroom activities
- visiting speakers
- visits to appropriate practice settings

Approaches to assessment

We recommend that, if you deliver the unit as a stand-alone unit, you assess the outcomes holistically. If you deliver it as part of the qualification, we recommend integration with the remaining HN units. You can integrate teaching, learning and assessment across units.

You can use a range of assessment methods and instruments, such as:

- assignments
- individual or group presentations
- video diaries

- critical incident analyses
- reflective accounts

An ongoing, holistic approach to assessment enables learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and application across the full range of outcomes. This can be achieved through a folio-based approach, where learners gather evidence over time through a combination of written, oral, and practical tasks. This can include reflective blogs or journals, video diaries, professional discussions, and reflective accounts linked to real or simulated practice. Assessment activities should encourage learners to apply their knowledge in meaningful contexts, such as case studies, scenario-based tasks, or role-play. For example, learners could present a case study on antenatal screening, create a visual timeline of fetal development, or reflect on the emotional and physiological aspects of labour and birth. Assessment should be inclusive and accessible, allowing for flexibility in how learners present their evidence. Digital tools can support creativity and engagement, and you should encourage learners to demonstrate critical thinking, empathy, and person-centred values throughout.

Equality and inclusion

This unit is designed to be as fair and as accessible as possible with no unnecessary barriers to learning or assessment.

You must consider the needs of individual learners when planning learning experiences, selecting assessment methods or considering alternative evidence.

Guidance on assessment arrangements for disabled learners and those with additional support needs is available on the [assessment arrangements web page](#).

Information for learners

Physiological Adaptations and Wellbeing in the Perinatal Period (SCQF level 7)

This information explains:

- what the unit is about
- what you should know or be able to do before you start
- what you need to do during the unit
- opportunities for further learning and employment

Unit information

This unit is part of HNC Healthcare Practice and it provides you with a strong foundation in reproductive health, fetal development, and newborn physiology. You explore the biological processes that occur from conception through to birth, including the stages of embryonic and fetal development, the physiological changes experienced during pregnancy, and the adaptations that occur in the newborn immediately after birth. You also examine common infant conditions and gain an understanding of antenatal screening procedures, including their purpose, timing, benefits, and limitations.

Before starting the unit, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of human biology and health-related terminology, although this is not essential. Entry to the unit is at your centre's discretion. You should, however, have effective communication and interpersonal skills, and a willingness to engage with sensitive topics such as pregnancy, birth, and neonatal care.

During the unit, you should engage with a range of learning activities, including independent research, group discussions, case studies, and practical observation where appropriate. We encourage you to use anatomical models, diagrams, and digital tools to support your understanding of complex physiological processes. You should reflect on ethical considerations, use inclusive language, and demonstrate

sensitivity to the diverse experiences women and individuals may have with pregnancy and birth.

The teaching, learning and assessment of the unit takes place in educational and simulated clinical care settings. Taking part in the unit's learning activities provides you with invaluable opportunities to develop and apply your knowledge, skills and understanding and meet the evidence requirements.

Your centre provides you with assessments. These can include:

- assignments
- folios
- essays
- individual or group presentations
- video diaries
- critical incident analyses
- reflective accounts
- any other appropriate methods

You must submit your assessments by the agreed deadlines and maintain a portfolio of evidence that demonstrates your understanding and application of the unit content. Your centre requires you to submit a statement that confirms that your submissions are all your own work and they will use plagiarism detection software to ensure the authenticity of your work. You should include and reference the following in your assessments:

- accurate terminology
- national and local screening programmes
- relevant Scottish and UK legislation
- professional codes of practice
- national health service (NHS) and public health guidance

The unit supports progression to further study in midwifery, nursing, and other health-related Higher National Diploma (HND) or degree-level programmes. You should investigate your chosen university's entry criteria. It also provides valuable knowledge and skills for those working in perinatal care, neonatal support, or wider

healthcare roles. Completing the unit contributes to your development as a reflective, knowledgeable, and compassionate practitioner, capable of supporting women and individuals and families through the early stages of life.

Meta-skills

Throughout this unit, you develop meta-skills that are useful for the healthcare practice sector.

Meta-skills are transferable behaviours and abilities that help you adapt and succeed in life, study and work. There are three categories of meta-skills: self-management, social intelligence and innovation.

Self-management

This meta-skill includes:

- focusing:
 - engaging with complex biological content, such as fetal development and newborn physiology, through structured research and formative assessment
- integrity:
 - reflecting on ethical considerations in antenatal screening
 - respecting diverse experiences of pregnancy and birth
- adapting:
 - applying new knowledge about anatomy, physiology, and screening procedures to different case scenarios and care contexts
- initiative:
 - independently exploring current research and guidelines in reproductive health
 - contributing to group discussions with confidence

Social intelligence

This meta-skill includes:

- feeling:
 - developing empathy and emotional awareness when discussing sensitive topics such as pregnancy loss, fertility, and newborn care
- communicating:
 - clearly explaining complex physiological processes and screening procedures using appropriate terminology in both written and verbal formats
- collaborating:
 - working effectively with peers to explore developmental stages, share insights, and build a shared understanding of inclusive and person-centred care

Innovation

This meta-skill includes:

- curiosity:
 - asking questions about how fetal development and newborn physiology relate to real-world healthcare practice and outcomes
- sense-making:
 - connecting theoretical knowledge of anatomy and physiology with practical applications in antenatal and postnatal care
- critical thinking:
 - evaluating the benefits and limitations of antenatal screening
 - interpreting developmental milestones in the context of evidence-based practice

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you develop skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

You learn about social, economic and environmental sustainability principles and how they relate to the healthcare practice sector. You also develop an understanding of the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#).

The sustainability goals that are most relevant for this unit are:

- SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing: ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages including:
 - reducing maternal mortality rates
 - ending preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age
 - reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment
 - promoting mental health and wellbeing
 - strengthening the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol
 - ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
 - providing universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, ensuring access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all
 - strengthening the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities: reducing inequalities including:
 - empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all
 - providing equal opportunity and reduced inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices

- providing age and social protection policies to achieve equality
- allowing safe migration and mobility of people

Administrative information

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History of changes

Version	Description of change	Date

Please check [our website](#) to ensure you are using the most up-to-date version of this unit.

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