

Information about caring for the Whenua

(placenta or afterbirth)

**Tena koutou katoa, Kia orana, Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Fakaalofa lahi
atu, Taloha Ni, Ni Sa Bula Vinaka,
Greetings and Welcome to National Women's**

Caring for the Whenua (placenta or afterbirth)

Whenua (also called the placenta or afterbirth) has a particular importance to Maori people because of the spiritual and physical connection between the afterbirth and the land. Because of this connection, there is sacredness around the care of the whenua. National Women's staff recognise that others also place special significance on the whenua/afterbirth/placenta.

This leaflet outlines the options available for the care and disposal of your baby's whenua and pito (umbilical cord). You will be asked to make a decision about this so we hope this information will assist you to make an informed decision. We would like to encourage women to think about this during pregnancy so they have an opportunity to consider and discuss with their whanau/family what needs to be done with the whenua/placenta.

National Women's staff are happy to discuss the various options with you if you are unsure about what to do. The Maori Health Advisor and Maori Chaplain are available Monday-Friday 8am-4.30pm to meet with Maori women and whanau. If National Women's is not your lead maternity carer (LMC), we recommend you discuss your plans for the whenua with your doctor or midwife.

Taking your whenua home

At National Women's we encourage women who are keeping their whenua to take it home when they leave the hospital. If you are not leaving the hospital straight after the birth, we suggest a family member take the whenua home directly from the Labour and Birthing Suite.

Testing of the whenua

When complications, such as infections, bleeding, prematurity, or a sick baby, occur in your pregnancy or at the time of birth the doctor may recommend your whenua be sent for examination. This may give important information that can help to explain what has happened and to improve the care we give you in subsequent pregnancies. These tests require your informed consent so an explanation about them will be provided before any testing is carried out. The whenua will look different and grey in colour when it is returned to you because it has been stored in formalin to preserve it. Several very thin pieces will be dissected and put through a process involving fixing and staining in order to study the whenua for signs of infection or any abnormality.

Important information is gained by these tests and the whenua is treated with care and respect.

How long do the tests take?

We will try to return the whenua to you as soon as we can. Testing of the whenua usually takes about 7 days, however it will need to be kept at the laboratory for up to 1 month in case any further tests are required.

Please let staff know if you need your whenua returned quickly and they will clearly document this on the request form that goes with the whenua to the laboratory. Although no guarantee is possible, laboratory staff will try to give your request priority.

The test results are written in a report and discussed with you at a follow up appointment. These are confidential to you and those caring for you. A copy of the results can be sent to your GP if you so choose.

Storage of the whenua

Please do not store your whenua in the fridge where food is kept, even if it is in a container. For cultural and hygiene reasons, it is not appropriate to store the whenua with food.

Disposal and burial of the whenua

The hospital will dispose of the whenua if you choose not to take it yourself. These whenua as well as some tissue and body parts are cremated and disposed of in landfill areas.

Burying the whenua

It is important to deal with your whenua as soon as possible for hygiene and safety reasons. Before handling your whenua wear gloves. Remove it from the plastic bag in which it is stored before planting it. Wash your hands well after burying your whenua, particularly if it has been returned to you after testing.

If you are not sure what you want to do with your whenua you could consider the following options:

- consulting your Kuia and Kaumatua/elders parents, whanau/family
- bury the whenua at your turangawaewae, place of whanau, hapu or iwi tribal origin
- bury the whenua at your home and plant a native tree, bush or plant
- bury the whenua where you were born (or temporarily in a pot plant if you can't do this soon)

If you need to store your whenua for some time before burying it and are unable to refrigerate it yourself you could temporarily bury it in a pot plant.

Please ask a staff member involved with your care if you have any questions about this information sheet.

Contact phone numbers

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| • National Women's | (09)367 0000 |
| • Chaplains | Ask operator to locate chaplain |
| • Pregnancy Loss Social Work Counsellors | 021863152 |
| • Maternal Mental Health Team | (09)307 4949 ext 4454 |

National Women's Health,
Updated April 2011