

## Postpartum

### After a Vaginal Birth



After having a baby, your body may be very tired.

It can take time to recover from a vaginal delivery. You may stay in the hospital or birth center from 1 to 4 days. In some cases, you may be able to go home the same day.

### Right after the delivery

Your temperature and blood pressure will be taken until they are stable. A nurse or other healthcare provider will observe you as you rest. You may have afterbirth pains. These are cramps caused by the uterus shrinking. Sanitary pads are used to soak up the discharge of the uterine lining. To make sure that you aren't bleeding too much, the pad will be checked. And the firmness of your uterus will be checked. To do this, a nurse will gently push down on your stomach. If you had anesthesia, you'll be watched closely until you can feel and move your toes. If you have perineal pain (pain between the vagina and anus), an ice pack can help.

### Newborn care

While still in the hospital or birth center, you'll learn how to hold and feed your baby. You will also be given instructions on how to care for your baby. This includes bathing and feeding.

## **Preparing to go home**

You may be anxious to go home as soon as possible. Before you and your baby go home, a healthcare provider will check to be sure you are healthy enough to take care of your baby and yourself. You're ready to go home when:

- You can walk to the bathroom and use the bathroom without help.
- You can eat solid food and swallow pills (if needed).
- You have no sign of infection or other health problems, including fever.
- You have adequate pain control.
- Your bleeding isn't excessive.
- You are able to care for your newborn and are emotionally stable.

Before leaving the hospital or birth center, you'll be given written instructions for home self-care after vaginal delivery. Be sure to follow these instructions carefully. If you have questions or concerns, talk about them now.

## **If you have stitches**

You may have received stitches in the skin near your vagina. The stitches might have closed an episiotomy (an incision that enlarges the opening of the vagina). Or you may have needed stitches to repair torn skin. Either way, your stitches should dissolve within weeks. Until then, you can help reduce discomfort, aid healing, and reduce your risk of infection by keeping the stitches clean. These tips can help:

- Gently wipe from front to back after you urinate or have a bowel movement.
- After wiping, spray warm water on the area. Or you can have a sitz bath. This means sitting in a tub with a few inches of water in it. Then pat the area dry or use a hairdryer on a cool setting.
- Do not use soap or any solution except water on the area.
- You can take a shower unless told not to.
- Change sanitary pads at least every 2 to 4 hours.
- Place cold or heat packs on the area as directed by your healthcare providers or nurses. Keep a thin towel between the pack and your skin.
- Sit on firm seats so the stitches pull less.

## **Postnatal follow-up**

Schedule a postnatal follow-up exam with your healthcare provider for about 6 weeks after delivery. During this exam, your uterus and vaginal area will be checked. Contact your healthcare provider if you think you or your baby are having any problems.

## **When to call your healthcare provider**

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have:

- A fever of 100.4°F (38.0°C) or higher
- Bleeding that needs a new sanitary pad after an hour, or large blood clots
- Pain in your vagina that gets worse and isn't relieved with medicine
- Swelling, discharge, or increased pain from vaginal tear or episiotomy
- Burning, pain, red streaks, or lumpy areas in your breasts that may be accompanied by flu-like symptoms
- Cracks, blisters, or blood on your nipples
- Burning or pain when you urinate
- Nausea or vomiting
- Dizziness or fainting
- Feelings of extreme sadness or anxiety, or a feeling that you don't want to be with your baby
- Belly pain that isn't relieved with medicine
- Vaginal discharge that has a bad odor
- No bowel movement for 5 days
- Painful urination, or inability to control urination
- Redness, warmth, or pain in the lower leg
- Chest pain

## **After Giving Birth: Changing Expectations for Parents**

Congratulations on your new baby! Diapers won't be the only thing you'll change in the months ahead. Your sense of yourself and how you relate to your partner will also be different. If you have other children, expect some emotional swings, as you and your family try out your new roles.

### **Not always rosy**

Most new mothers experience some form of the baby blues. These mood swings are caused by hormonal shifts in your body. Stress due to the recent changes in your life and lack of sleep also have an effect. The baby blues may last a few days or up to 2 weeks. You may feel a sense of loss, frustration, or anger. Or you may be sad that having a baby isn't what you'd imagined. Sometimes a birth triggers childhood memory or reminds you about the death of a loved one.

### **Balancing the blues**

Recognize your need to talk, to feel protected, to have private time. Allow yourself to cry, to sit, to think. Ask for help when you need it and accept help when it's offered. Knowing your needs is not a weakness. Share your thoughts with your partner. Or pick up the phone and call a friend, your mother, a sister, or an aunt. Rest, eat right, and get some light exercise. The mind feels best when the body feels good.

### **Shaping your family**

Over the next year, your household will go through many changes. If this is your first child, you and your partner will have to adjust to the idea of being a family. If you have older children, help them adjust to the new baby. Sharing chores, time, and attention is something you'll all need to work on. If you're a single mother, you may find that your baby has a "family" of friends as well as relatives.

### **Share activities**

As a newborn, your baby has many needs. These must be blended into the family's style. Take the baby on outings, so he or she is part of the family from the beginning. Involve everyone in activities you all can enjoy doing together.



**Outings with your baby will help form new family bonds.**

## **As parents and lovers**

The demands on your relationship have just increased. So do your best to strengthen your partnership ties. Set aside time to talk every day. Put away the dinner dishes together or take a break before bedtime. Also, try to spend time alone. It will help you remember why you're together. Return to sex when it feels right and it's OK with your healthcare provider. But don't think of breastfeeding as a form of birth control. Instead, talk with your healthcare provider about birth control methods that might be right for this time in your life.

## **When to call your healthcare provider**

Call your healthcare provider if you have any of the following concerns:

- You don't want to be with the baby.
- You have no interest in eating or are not able to sleep.
- Your symptoms are not getting better, and you're getting more upset.
- You think you may harm yourself or the baby.

The Depression After Delivery hotline (800-944-4773) may also be helpful.

## **After Giving Birth: How to Feel Healthy**



Helping yourself feel fit is one of the best things you can do for your baby. A little exercise will tone your muscles. You'll feel stronger and more energized. You'll also feel more awake and aware. Don't worry about your weight right now. Your goal is to feel healthy. Part of feeling good is dressing for comfort. If you dress "smart," you can be a busy new mom and still look great.

## **Continue Kegel exercises**

You may have been told to do Kegel exercises during pregnancy. These exercises strengthen the muscles that are strained by carrying and delivering the baby. You can return to your Kegels as soon as you feel ready. Why not start today? Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles (the ones that control your urine stream) for at least 5 seconds. Relax, then squeeze again. Work your way up to 50 or 100 Kegels a day.

## **Exercise often**

Exercise helps you get in shape. It also strengthens your muscles, so you are better fit for lifting the baby. As an added benefit, exercise gives you a sense that you're doing something good for yourself. Take your baby for a short walk, or spend 10 minutes stretching. If you were active during pregnancy, you can probably begin light exercise as soon as you feel ready. But be sure to check with your healthcare provider before you begin.

## **Stay off the scale**

For the first month, think about regaining energy and feeling good, not about losing weight. Losing weight too soon can make you feel more tired. Instead, focus on caring for your baby and eating balanced meals. You may lose some weight without even trying, especially if you're breastfeeding. Once your energy level is back to normal, you can begin to lose weight. A gradual weight loss of 4 or 5 pounds a month is safest.

## **Dress smart**

You'll want to be comfortable during the first days after delivery. Wear a robe, pajamas, or sweats — whatever feels best. Soon you may want to look more like your prepregnant self. Do your hair and wear makeup, if you normally do. A loose-fitting dress may feel good. But do yourself a favor: Don't reach for your jeans. It's likely to be a month or more before you can wear them. If leaking breasts are a problem, put pads inside your bra and dress in layers. If you're breastfeeding, shirts that open in front or pullover tops are good choices. A scarf or shawl can be used as a drape if you breastfeed when others are present.

## **When to call your healthcare provider**

Remember to schedule your postpartum visit. If you delivered by cesarean, be seen within 2 weeks. For vaginal delivery, be seen 4 to 6 weeks after the birth. Also, call your healthcare provider if you have:

- Heavy bleeding
- Fever
- Redness or persistent lump in breasts
- Inability to void or have a bowel movement after 1 week
- Severe pain

- Worsening depression

## **Breast Care After Birth**

A few days after your baby's birth, your breasts will swell with milk. They are likely to feel tender and heavy. This is normal. To help prevent breast soreness and control irritation, follow these tips:

### **Coping with swelling**

Here are tips to cope with swelling:

- Use cold compresses or an ice pack to help reduce the ache or pain.
- Breastfeed often to keep milk from clogging your breast ducts.
- If your nipples are flat from breast swelling, hand express some milk. Squeeze out a few drops of milk by massaging and compressing your breasts.
- If you have swelling with pain or fever, call your healthcare provider.

### **Preventing sore nipples**

Here are tips to prevent sore nipples:

- Make sure baby latches on to your breast correctly. The baby's mouth should be opened very wide and your entire areola should be in the baby's mouth.
- You can let milk dry on your nipples. This dried milk can protect the skin on your nipple.
- Do not use alcohol, soap, or scented cleansers on your breasts. These can cause the nipples to dry and crack.
- Do not wear nursing pads that are lined with plastic. They hold in moisture and can cause chapping.
- If you have cracked or bleeding nipples, consult your healthcare provider or a lactation consultant. He or she will make sure that your baby's latch is correct and may suggest topical treatment, like pure lanolin.



**Moist heat, like a shower, helps to promote the release of breastmilk.**

## **Choosing a good bra**

Wearing the right-sized bra is especially important now. If a bra is too tight, it may cause a duct in your breast to clog and become irritated. If possible, have a salesperson help fit you for a new bra. Look for one that's 100% cotton and comfortable. Also, choose a bra with wide straps that won't dig into your back and shoulders. If you're breastfeeding, find a nursing bra that allows you to uncover one breast at a time.

## **If you are not breastfeeding**

Here are tips to avoid discomfort:

- Avoid stimulation of nipples
- Wear a tight-fitting bra
- Apply cold compresses or ice packs for discomfort

## **Call your healthcare provider**

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of the following:

- A fever or chills
- Extreme tiredness and body aches, as if you have the flu
- Burning or pain in one or both breasts
- Red streaks on a breast
- Hard or lumpy spots in one or both breasts
- A feeling of warmth or heat in one or both breasts
- Breasts so swollen your baby cannot latch on to the nipples
- Nipples that are cracked or bleeding
- Low milk supply or your milk does not flow freely



## For New Mothers: Staying Fit After Delivery



After you deliver your baby, you can start to exercise when you feel ready. Let your body be your guide. Most women are ready to exercise after 6 weeks, where some women will be ready a few days after giving birth. If you've had a cesarean section, you will need more time. Ask your healthcare provider when it is safe to start exercising again.

### Exercise tips for new mothers

You can start doing Kegel exercises as soon as you deliver your baby. Do them at least 10 times a day to help avoid bladder problems later on. Kegel exercises help strengthen your pelvic muscles. To do them, squeeze the muscles that you use to stop passing urine (do not do this while urinating). Hold that squeeze for a count of 10, then release.

You will want to resume other exercise gradually and talk to your healthcare provider before starting. Always exercise with care. When you first start exercising after giving birth, try simple exercises that help strengthen major muscle groups, including abdominal and back muscles. Slowly add moderate-intensity exercise. Try to work up to at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week. Moderate intensity means you are moving enough to raise your heart rate and start sweating. You can still talk normally. But you cannot sing. Muscle-strengthening exercises should be done along with your aerobic activity on at least 2 days a week. Look for ways to combine exercising with being with your new baby. Try putting your baby into a front pack or in the stroller and take a walk.

### Strengthening stomach muscles

Many new mothers want to strengthen their stomach muscles after giving birth. Try this exercise when you're ready to resume your program. It will strengthen the front and side muscles of your stomach:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Cross your arms over your stomach. Use your fingers to gently pull the sides of the stomach toward the middle of your body.
- Exhale and try to pull the stomach muscles toward your spine. Gently raise your shoulders off the floor, no more than 6 to 8 inches. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times.

### Incision Care After Vaginal Birth

After your baby's birth, you may have needed stitches in the skin near your vagina. The stitches might have closed an episiotomy (a cut that enlarges the opening of the vagina). Or you may

have needed stitches to repair torn skin. Either way, your stitches should dissolve within weeks. Until then, use this handout as a guide to help ease any discomfort and aid healing.

### **Keep clean**

You can reduce your risk of infection by keeping the area around the stitches clean. These hints can help:

- Gently wipe from front to back after you urinate or have a bowel movement.
- After wiping, spray warm water on the stitches. Pat dry. If you are too sore, just spray the area after urination and then pat dry without wiping.
- Do not use soap or any solution except water unless instructed by your healthcare provider.
- Change sanitary pads at least every 2 to 4 hours.

### **Eat to stay regular**

Having bowel movements is easier if you're not constipated. Follow these tips:

- Eat fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains, and bran cereals.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Don't strain to have a bowel movement.
- Ask your healthcare provider about using a stool softener. If you are breastfeeding, ask before you take any medicine.

### **Reduce your discomfort**

Here are some tips to make you more comfortable:

- Sit in a warm bath (sitz bath).
- Place cold or heat packs on your stitches. Keep a thin towel between the pack and your skin.
- Sit on a firm seat so the stitches pull less.
- Use medicated spray as ordered by your healthcare provider.

### **Call your healthcare provider**

Call your healthcare provider if you have:

- Heavy or gushing bleeding from the vagina
- Discharge that has a bad odor

- Severe pain in the belly or increased pain near your stitches
- If your episiotomy or tear opens
- Fever or chills
- No bowel movement within one week after the birth of your baby
- Pain or urgency with urination, or inability to urinate

## Nutrition While Breastfeeding

### Do I need a special diet for breastfeeding?



You **don't** have to eat a special diet to make enough milk for your baby. Also, your milk will be of good quality for your baby regardless of what you eat. But your body needs fuel to make breastmilk. So eat your fill of a variety of foods. Breastfeeding isn't an excuse to eat and drink everything you want. But it's not a reason to avoid favorite foods either.

### Healthy diet for the new mother

A healthy diet is recommended for all women and offers many benefits to the new mother. Choosing a variety of healthy foods creates a pattern for the entire family. Each family member benefits. Women who are breastfeeding need about 500 extra calories per day. Some women might need more, while others might need less. When choosing foods, use the nutrition chart below as a guide.

Bread, cereal, rice, and pasta	Vegetables	Fruit
Milk, yogurt, and cheese	Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts	Fats, oils, and sweets (use sparingly)

## What's good for you?

Here are some things to do:

- Breastfeeding women need to drink when they feel thirsty. There is no specific amount of water you need to drink to make enough milk.
- Follow healthy eating guidelines.
- Snack on fruit or low-fat dairy products if you're hungry between meals.
- If your healthcare provider recommends it, keep taking prenatal vitamins.

## What's not good for you?

Here are other things to consider:

- Limit fatty foods and foods that are high in sugar (cookies, cakes).
- Be aware that what enters your body may pass into your breastmilk. Limit caffeine. It is not just in coffee. It is also in cola, tea, and chocolate.
- Limit the amount of fish that may contain mercury, such as shark and swordfish.
- Talk with your healthcare provider before taking any medicines. It is important to let your healthcare provider know that you are nursing. Some medicines are not safe with breastfeeding.
- **Remember:** Alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs also affect your breastmilk and your baby. Talk with your healthcare provider.

## Understanding Postpartum Depression

You've just had a baby. You expected to be excited and happy. But instead you find yourself crying for no reason. You may have trouble coping with your daily tasks. You feel sad, tired, and hopeless most of the time. You may even feel ashamed or guilty. But what you're going through is not your fault and you can feel better. Talk to your healthcare provider. He or she can help.



## **What is depression?**

Depression is a mood disorder that affects the way you think and feel. The most common symptom is a feeling of deep sadness. You may also feel as if you just can't cope with life. Other symptoms include:

- Gaining or losing a lot of weight
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Feeling tired all the time
- Feeling restless
- Crying a lot
- Having too little or too much appetite.
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Having headaches, aches and pains, or stomach problems that won't go away.
- Fears of harming your baby
- Lack of interest in your baby
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- No longer finding pleasure in things you used to
- Having trouble thinking clearly or making decisions
- Thinking about death or suicide

## **Depression after childbirth**

You may be weepy and tired right after giving birth. These feelings are normal. They're sometimes called the "baby blues." These blues go away after 1 to 2 weeks. However, postpartum (meaning "after birth") depression lasts much longer and is more severe than the "baby blues." It can make you feel sad and hopeless. You may also fear that your baby will be harmed and worry about being a bad mother.

## **What causes postpartum depression?**

The exact cause of postpartum depression is unknown. Changes in brain chemistry or structure are believed to play a big role in depression. It may be due to changes in your hormones during and after childbirth. You may also be tired from caring for your baby and adjusting to being a mother. All these factors may make you feel depressed. In some cases, your genes may also play a role.

## **Depression can be treated**

There are many ways to treat postpartum depression. Talking to your healthcare provider is the first step toward feeling better.

## **When to call your healthcare provider**

Call your healthcare provider if you:

- Cry for no clear reason
- Have trouble sleeping, eating, and making choices
- Questions whether you can handle caring for a baby
- Have intense feelings of sadness, anxiety, or despair that prevent you from being able to do your daily tasks