

After Your Baby Is Born: What to Expect Postpartum



What can I expect in the first few months after my baby is born?

Your body and emotions change a lot in the first weeks and months after you give birth.

Abdomen: Your abdomen (belly) may still look pregnant for a few weeks. In the first few days, you may have cramping as your uterus (womb) goes back to its normal size.

Vagina: You will have vaginal bleeding for about 4 to 5 days after you give birth that is like a heavy period. You might pass a few clots. The bleeding usually goes away after 2 to 3 weeks, but you may have some vaginal bleeding or spotting for up to 8 weeks after giving birth. Your vagina may be tender and dry for a few months.

Perineum: This is the area between your vagina and your anus (where stool comes out). You may have soreness in this area for a few weeks, especially if you have a tear or stitches. You can put an ice pack on this area the first day after birth. After 24 hours, sitting in a warm bath can help with the soreness. If you have hemorrhoids, you can use witch hazel pads from the drugstore to help the hemorrhoid pain.

Breasts: Your milk will come in about 2 to 5 days after you give birth. Your breasts will feel full and tender as they begin to fill with milk. This is called engorgement. Wearing a tight bra can help ease the aching. Your nipples may also be sore as they become used to having your baby suckle them. If your baby is latching properly, the pain will go away after the first few minutes of breastfeeding. Do not pump or express milk to make the engorgement go away. This will just make more milk come in, and your breasts will stay engorged. It can take 6 to 8 weeks for both you and your baby to become really used to breastfeeding.

Bowel and Bladder: You may have some gas pain during the first few weeks. You may be constipated, especially if you are breastfeeding. You can prevent constipation by drinking plenty of water and eating lots of fruits and vegetables. In the first few months postpartum, some women leak urine when coughing, sneezing, or picking up something heavy. You can start doing pelvic muscle exercises (often called Kegel exercises) right away to strengthen the muscles that control and support your bladder.

Cesarean Incision: If you had a cesarean birth, it will take a few extra weeks before you are completely healed from the surgery. Take pain medication as you need it and rest when you can. The outside of your incision (cut) should heal after 2 to 3 weeks. You may have soreness or numbness at the incision for several months.

Sex: Your body needs time to heal after giving birth. While your hormones are adjusting, you may have less desire for sex, vaginal dryness, and/or tenderness in your vagina or perineum. It is important to make time to be with your partner and share physical touching in ways that you both like, whether or not you are ready to start having sex. In most cases, you can start having vaginal sex when you feel ready and your bleeding has stopped. If you are breastfeeding, you might need to use lubricant. You can get pregnant before you start having periods again so it is important to use birth control if you do not want to become pregnant right away. Talk with your health care provider about which method is best for you.

Weight: It can take up to 6 months to lose the weight you gained during pregnancy. Because a healthy diet is so important for breastfeeding, do not diet. Gentle exercise, such as taking walks, can help you start to lose weight until you can start doing more heavy exercise.

Emotions and Postpartum Depression: Women have a wide range of emotions after giving birth. You may feel excited, happy, exhausted, and depressed all on the same day as you adjust to a new world, a new baby, and a new job taking care of your baby. Having lots of different feelings is normal.

- About 7 in every 10 women will have “postpartum blues.” This usually starts about 3 days after the birth of your baby and can last 1 or 2 weeks. You may cry easily and feel sad, irritable or tired. Postpartum blues usually go away once you start to get 4 to 5 hours of sleep each night that is not interrupted.



- About 10 to 15 out of every 100 women will have postpartum depression. Postpartum depression usually starts about 2 months after your baby is born and can last for 6 to 12 months. You may feel very sad, anxious, or overwhelmed or have mood swings and guilt. You are at higher risk for depression if you have a history of depression yourself or in your family, had depression during your pregnancy, have a sick baby, and/or have many stressful things going on in your life.
- About 1 in 1000 women will develop a rare but serious health problem called postpartum psychosis. This can start anytime in the first weeks after giving birth. Women with postpartum psychosis have severe problems thinking normally. You may have strange beliefs, hallucinations (see or hear things that aren't there) or paranoia (feel suspicious). If you have a history of bipolar disorder yourself or in your family or have had psychosis before, you are at higher risk for postpartum psychosis.

Call your health care provider right away if you feel very nervous, cannot stop crying, or are having thoughts of hurting yourself or your baby.

What can I do to help me recover and adjust to being a mother?

- Ask for help. Let other people do the cooking and cleaning. Focus on yourself and your baby.
- Sleep when your baby sleeps. Your body needs rest to heal.
- Get exercise and fresh air. You can take your baby, go by yourself, or walk with your partner or a friend.
- Take a few minutes every day for yourself, even just to shower and rest for a bit, read, or listen to music.
- Talk to other mothers. You can join a parents' support group or just spend time with other mothers.
- Make time every day to enjoy your baby. Encourage your partner to do this, too!

When do I need to call my health care provider?

- You have a fever of 100.4°F or above.
- You soak a pad in an hour or less or have golf-ball sized blood clots or larger.
- Your cesarean incision or stitches in your vagina become red, swollen, or have pus.
- Your discharge has a foul odor, especially if you also have pain or tenderness in your abdomen.
- You have a severe headache that does not go away with medication or have changes in your vision.
- You have severe pain, redness, or swelling in the back your legs.
- You have severe depression, hallucinations, or thoughts of hurting yourself, your baby, or someone else.

For More Information

American College of Nurse-Midwives

<http://www.ourmomentoftruth.com/Post-Birth-and-Recovery>

KidsHealth

<http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/recovering-delivery.html#>

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 7.1

Approved November 2016. This handout replaces "Motherhood: The Early Days" published in Volume 54, Number 6, November/December 2009.

This page may be reproduced for noncommercial use by health care professionals to share with clients. Any other reproduction is subject to the Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health's approval. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, the Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health suggests that you consult your health care provider.