

Congratulations!

At last, it has finally happened! Your pregnancy is over and you have a new baby! The weeks following the birth of your baby are important ones as your body returns to normal. Knowing what to expect and relying on continued support of your healthcare team will help you relax through the postpartum experience with as much confidence and comfort as possible.

If this is your first child, your healthcare team wants you to be aware of the transitions in which you find yourself, your baby and your family. If you already have children, your healthcare team can provide supportive reminders and information about the days after your new baby arrives.

After you leave the hospital, please do not hesitate to call your healthcare provider if you have questions or problems. Being aware of your own physical and emotional well-being as you take your new infant home can be very helpful at this special time of your life.

Normal Changes

In the 4-6 weeks following the delivery of your baby, the changes associated with pregnancy are gradually reversed as the body begins to return to its non-pregnant state. The amount of time required for this process varies and depends on the type of delivery you had and other associated medical conditions. The first 6 weeks following the birth of your baby is called the postpartum period.

Afterbirth Pain

As the uterus shrinks, its muscle fibers contract, causing afterbirth pains. These contractions are much less painful than labor contractions because there is no associated pain from the cervical dilation or a stretching birth canal. Afterbirth pains are most noticeable within the first 3-4 days following delivery, particularly for women who have had previous deliveries. These contractions are also pronounced during breastfeeding. However, they help shrink the uterus to its pre-pregnant state and reduce blood loss following delivery.

Lochia (Vaginal Discharge)

The drainage from the birth canal following delivery is called lochia. During the immediate few days after the birth, the discharge is like a menstrual flow. In 3-4 days, the discharge becomes more watery and pale. By the second week, lochia is thicker and more yellow in color. Finally, after 4 weeks, the discharge decreases to a minimum as the uterine lining heals.

The odor of the lochia is usually described as “fleshy, musty, or earthy” and should not be bad or offensive. You may experience occasional cramping and with that, the passing of a clot or brief bleeding. This is normal. Do not be alarmed. Lochia is often heavier when the mother gets out of bed. During rest, gravity lets the blood pool in the vagina. It is important to notify your healthcare provider if you experience heavy, profuse and persistent bleeding (more than one pad per hour or passing a clot greater than the size of a fifty-cent piece), or there is a foul odor to the discharge. These may be signs of problems.

Hygiene and Episiotomy

A periwash helps prevent infection and aid in healing after birth. Use a peri-bottle filled with warm water to wash the area between your legs after you urinate or have a bowel movement. Blot dry with toilet tissue. Always blot dry from front to back to avoid introducing bacteria from the rectum into the urethra. Use an anesthetic spray as prescribed. Change your pads frequently so that a dry surface is next to healing skin.

If you have stitches, you may notice them begin to pull and itch on the second or third day. This is part of the healing process. A tub bath will lessen this discomfort. Sutures are absorbed and do not need removed.

A sitz bath (clear, comfortably hot water in the bathtub up over your waist) promotes healing and comfort. Do not add anything to the water. This bath can be done 2-3 times a day for 15-20 minutes at a time.

Hemorrhoids

Some women suffer from hemorrhoids during and after pregnancy. They are often more painful than sutures. Use sitz baths, witch hazel pads, anesthetic sprays or other medications as recommended by your healthcare practitioner. Spend time in standing or lying positions and avoid sitting whenever possible. When you do sit, squeeze your buttocks together first, to make it more comfortable. When bathing, lie down to avoid pressure on the hemorrhoids. A stool softener or laxative may be beneficial at times.

Birth Canal

The vagina, which has stretched to accommodate delivery, gradually returns to its previous condition by the end of the third week. The supporting structures and muscles of the pelvic floor may not completely return to normal for 6-7 weeks. Episiotomies usually require 4 or more weeks to heal.

Breastfeeding mothers are more likely to have vaginal dryness and some discomfort during intercourse for 4-6 months after delivery. This is caused by diminished estrogen production due to lactation. It is important to resume Kegel exercises in the first few postpartum days. These pelvic floor exercises may help speed healing and help muscles return to normal.

Menstrual Cycle

The first menstrual period following delivery is usually delayed by breastfeeding. Most women will experience their period within 7-9 weeks after delivery. Nursing mothers frequently resume menstrual periods by 12 weeks, but some do not until they have completed breastfeeding. Egg production may return before the first menstrual period which may result in pregnancy.

The Uterus

The normal changes of the pregnant uterus to accommodate a developing baby are not reversed overnight. During pregnancy, the uterus increases approximately 11 times its non-pregnant weight, weighing more than 2 pounds immediately after delivery and is about the size of a grapefruit. It can be felt just below the umbilicus. In about 6 weeks, the uterus will return to its normal weight, a mere 2 ounces.

Bladder

Bladder sensation and muscle tone are often diminished after birth. It is important for you to try to empty your bladder every 3-4 hours while hospitalized, especially right after your delivery. Because your body will be getting rid of extra fluid, you will notice that you will eliminate large amounts of urine the first few days after delivery. Symptoms such as burning, frequent urination or urination in small amounts should be reported to your healthcare practitioner.

Bowels

Hormones, medications, dehydration, perineal pain and decreased physical activity may make bowel function sluggish after delivery. The first bowel movement usually occurs within 2-3 days. If needed, a laxative or stool softener may provide relief from constipation and hemorrhoids that may develop during and after labor. If you are breastfeeding, consult your baby's healthcare provider before taking any medications, including laxatives.

A balanced diet with adequate fluids will help with bowel movements. Fiber acts as a natural laxative and dietary fiber can be found in fruits and vegetables (especially unpeeled) and in whole-grain bread, cereal and pasta.

Having your first bowel movement is not as traumatic as you may think it will be, and will be more uncomfortable if you put it off. Have a tub bath afterwards for comfort and cleansing.

Post Delivery



What you need to
know about your body