

Taking Care of *You*

Your Postpartum Health and Care





A Message to You

Mothers carry part of their baby with them forever – in their heart and sometimes with changes to their body. You have just been through a life changing experience. Being pregnant touches your mind, body, and spirit. You may feel differently about yourself and the world. This is a time to honor the experience you've just had and take good care of yourself.

People often talk about how to care for a baby once he or she is born. However, they do not often talk about what mothers may experience after giving birth. New mothers often have many questions about their bodies and emotions. This booklet will offer some answers that can help.

Why am I having so many backaches and headaches?

Some people experience headaches after they have a baby. This can be caused by the shifting hormones in your body. Lack of sleep and the stress of being a new mother can also cause headaches. While headaches can be caused by common postpartum problems like lack of sleep, they can also be a health warning sign. Seek medical advice if the headache doesn't go away or if you have blurry vision or feel dizzy.

Breastfeeding and the weight of full breasts can contribute to backaches. Pay attention to your position when you sleep, hold, carry, and feed your baby. For example, try to use a baby carrier or a sling instead of carrying your baby in his or her car seat. See if there are different ways you can sit or use pillows as props to relieve pressure on your neck and back. You can try putting heat on the muscles to help them relax or take a warm bath. You can also take some ibuprofen (like Motrin™ and Advil™) to help with the pain.

No More Secrets!

The problems and discomforts people experience after having a baby are not often talked about. This doesn't mean that the issues are not common. Knowing what might happen is helpful. And it's a sign of strength to get advice about how to deal with them.





Why is my hair falling out?

Each of the hairs on our head goes through 2 phases: a growing phase, which may last for several years, followed by a much shorter resting phase. After the resting phase, hair falls out and is replaced by new growth. During pregnancy, more estrogen causes hair to remain in the growing phase longer. The overall effect is a head of hair that is thicker and fuller. After delivery, when estrogen levels drop, there is more hair in the phase of resting and falling out; this hair loss may often peak around 3 months postpartum.

Varicose veins and stretch marks— make them go away!

We wish we could! Extra skin, stretch marks, changing breast sizes, changing shoe sizes, different hair texture, varicose veins — consider these a badge of courage.

How long will I continue to have pain around my bottom?

If you had a vaginal tear or stitches, vaginal tissue has a great blood supply and will heal quickly. It can be very painful for the first week or two. Keep the area clean and squirt with warm water after you use the bathroom each time, such as with a peri bottle. Alternating ice packs with warm tub soaks can also help with the pain and the healing process. It is best to refrain from sexual intercourse until the area is pain free. If you are continuing to experience pain at your postpartum visit, your health care provider should check to make sure there is not a problem with the healing process.



Why does my c-section incision still hurt?

If you had a c-section, you have undergone major abdominal surgery. A number of nerves were cut during the procedure and will take time to repair. It can take up to six months or more for all of the nerves in the abdominal area to heal completely. Some women continue to experience numbness, tingling and odd shooting pains around their scar for months after delivery.

How long will my bleeding continue after delivery?

For the first few days after birth your vaginal bleeding (lochia) will be dark red and look like a heavy menstrual period. It may come out intermittently in small gushes or flow more evenly. If you've been lying down for a while and blood has collected in your vagina, you may see some small clots when you get up. Within 2-4 days after birth, the lochia will be more watery and pinkish in color. By about ten days after the birth, you should have only a small amount of white or yellow-white discharge. If you are breastfeeding, you may have some episodes of small amounts of red bleeding during breastfeeding. The process of making milk makes your uterus contract, which helps with recovery.



How can I tell if I'm bleeding too much?

If bright red spotting reappears after your lochia has already lightened, it may just be a sign that you need to slow down. But if you continue to spot after taking it easy for a few days, check with your healthcare provider. Call your healthcare provider if you have heavy bleeding (soaking a sanitary pad or more in an hour), blood clots the size of an egg or bigger, if you pass tissue, or if you have vaginal discharge that smells bad.

When should I stop taking my prenatal vitamin?

You've started a great habit by taking a vitamin every day. When your prenatal vitamins are gone you can switch to a daily multivitamin for women. Folic acid and iron are especially important now.



Hemorrhoids and constipation – what can I do?

Hemorrhoids are varicose veins that develop in the rectal area. Many women may develop a hemorrhoid during pregnancy or birth because of the added pressure in your bottom. Hemorrhoids can be painful and itchy but usually go away within a few weeks of delivery. Witch hazel pads are usually recommended. There are a variety of products available, if that is desired. Heat AND cold are usually helpful too. You might try alternating ice packs with soaking in a tub of very warm water. Your provider can also recommend medicine that has a numbing effect and/or prescribe a steroid medication that will decrease the swelling.



Constipation is a common problem that can occur after delivery. It can make hemorrhoids worse and cause pain in your belly. Adding fiber (such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains) to your diet and trying an over-the-counter stool softener such as Colace™ or glycerine suppositories can help prevent constipation and help heal hemorrhoids. Drinking lots of water can help too.

Why do I pee when I laugh, sneeze, cough, or jump?

During pregnancy and childbirth, the pelvic floor muscles, nerves and ligaments may get stretched and sometimes injured, causing some women to experience a lack of urine control called stress incontinence. For most women, the problem will gradually improve after a few weeks. Physical therapy is available and effective.

You can do Kegel exercises to help with this problem. Kegels are exercises that help strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. These exercises help stop urine from leaking out when you don't want it to. They may also help make sex more enjoyable for you.



How to do Kegel Exercises

To find the correct muscles, try to stop the flow of urine while you are peeing. The muscles you squeeze are the pelvic floor muscles. Once you learn to do this exercise, do not do it while peeing.

To make these muscles stronger, squeeze and contract, then hold them for a few seconds. Repeat the process 10 times in a session. As the muscles become stronger, hold them longer. It's a good idea for women to do kegel exercises several times every day. You can do them anywhere – watching TV, at a stoplight, wherever!



Breasts — they should come with instructions!

Breasts grow and change as part of your body's preparation to feed your baby. Hormones will signal your body to begin milk production. For the first few days after birth (and sometimes before delivery), you may notice a thick, yellowish substance that comes from your breasts. This is called colostrum. It is usually on the second or third day that your mature milk will come in. In the first few days after birth, your nipples will be sensitive.

For those breastfeeding, that extra sensitivity provides feedback on how your baby is positioned — if you're continuing to feel discomfort 20-30 seconds after your baby attaches, that's a clue to adjust your baby's position until it's comfortable for both of you.

You may also notice belly pain, like menstrual cramps, when your baby is suckling. These are called after pains, when the hormones that release milk cause your uterus to cramp, helping slow down bleeding. Ibuprofen, 600 mg up to four times a day, can help you cope with the cramping sensation.

Mothers who are separated from their babies, including infants who are hospitalized, and want to give their babies human milk can begin pumping to build their milk supply.

Here are some common concerns and things that can be done to help:

- Use ice packs and ibuprofen for engorgement (very full breasts).
- Try massage, feeding your baby often, a heating pad or ibuprofen for clogged ducts.

- For nipple soreness, change positions each time you nurse.
- After nursing, express a few drops of milk and gently rub it on your nipples.
- Try letting your nipples air-dry after showering or wear a soft cotton shirt.

Yeast infection can affect the mother's nipples and the baby's mouth (known as thrush) so both mother and baby should be treated. It is also important to wash your hands with soap and warm water before you touch your breasts to lower your risk of infection. Mastitis is an infection of the breast and requires antibiotics for treatment. Signs include fever, breast pain, swelling, and red streaks on the breast or breasts that feel warm to the touch.



Breastfeeding and/or expressing breast milk can be very rewarding and also difficult. Get support early and often. And if you are having trouble feeding your baby, ask for help as soon as possible. Some resources are your health care provider, local WIC program, a lactation consultant, or local support groups such as La Leche League (lll.org). You can also call the hospital or birth center where you had your baby. Another resource is the National Breastfeeding Information Line 1-800-994-9662 or womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding. You can also call 1-877-452-5324 for help 24 hours a day.





Sex? Now? I just want to sleep!

Many women find that their sex drive in the first months postpartum is not what it was before they were pregnant. There are many reasons for this. In the first few weeks you may be very tired and sore. Shifting hormones can play a role as decreased levels of estrogen result in less natural lubrication. New mothers may also find that many of their needs for cuddling and touching are fulfilled by taking care of their babies.

As for sex, go slow in the beginning and consider using lubrication. Talk with your partner about your feelings. Remember, your desire for intimacy with your partner will likely be increased if you are rested, not feeling overwhelmed, and if you feel supported.

Why do I still look pregnant?

It takes at least six weeks for your uterus to shrink back to its pre-pregnancy size. This happens slowly.

Many women may find that the rest of their “baby weight” does not go away so easily. “Getting your body back” is a common thought among new mothers. Give yourself a break. Your body just made another person! Wear loose and comfortable clothes. View images of postpartum strength and beauty such as from the 4th Trimester Bodies Project.

If you are actively seeking to lose weight, go slowly. You might set a goal for about 2-4 pounds a month until you've reached a weight that is healthy for you.

Eating lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is good for many reasons. Avoiding fried foods, processed foods, and food with a lot of sugar and salt will help with taking care of yourself. Drinking plenty of fluids (water is best) every day will also help.

Breastfeeding or expressing breast milk is a great way to feed your baby and some people lose weight when they breastfeed. Others may hold on to weight until they stop. Talk to your provider about a balancing your health goals in ways that are safe and manageable for you.





Exercise can:

- Strengthen your back and your abdomen
- Help to relieve neck and back pain
- Raise levels of natural chemicals in your body that give you a natural high and make you feel good
- Help you lose weight
- Help you deal with stress

Exercise? But I can't even get a shower!

Start slowly. Try walking around your neighborhood. See if you can find some friends or maybe another new parent to walk with you. Even though it may seem like a lot of work to exercise, it can really help you feel better. Plus, many babies really enjoy going on walks too!

Baby wearing can be fun and useful, not only for when you are out and about but also around the home. Infants usually feel happy and settled when close to their caregivers.

With regards to safety, baby's airways should always be unblocked so be careful not to cover their face. Also, infants should have their necks supported. This means that a baby's head might be turned to the side alongside your body. A baby's face should never be slumped down or tilted up towards the sky. Take care to monitor baby's temperature, being in close physical contact can be a warming experience, so check the feel of baby's skin and the color of his or her cheeks as a guide for whether it might be getting too hot.



Check out great tips and tools at
myeatsmartmovemore.com

I need birth control, already?!

Did you know that...

- Some women can get pregnant again soon after having a baby?
- You can still get pregnant if you're breastfeeding.
- Your body needs time to recover after having a baby before you get pregnant again.
- If you're not doing anything to prevent getting pregnant again, it could happen.
- There are a number of good birth control options for nursing moms.

While you don't need to make decisions right now about the size of your family, it is good to think about your plans. Some questions to ask yourself and your partner include:

- Would you like to have more children in the future?
- If yes, how many would you like to have?
- When would you like to have them?

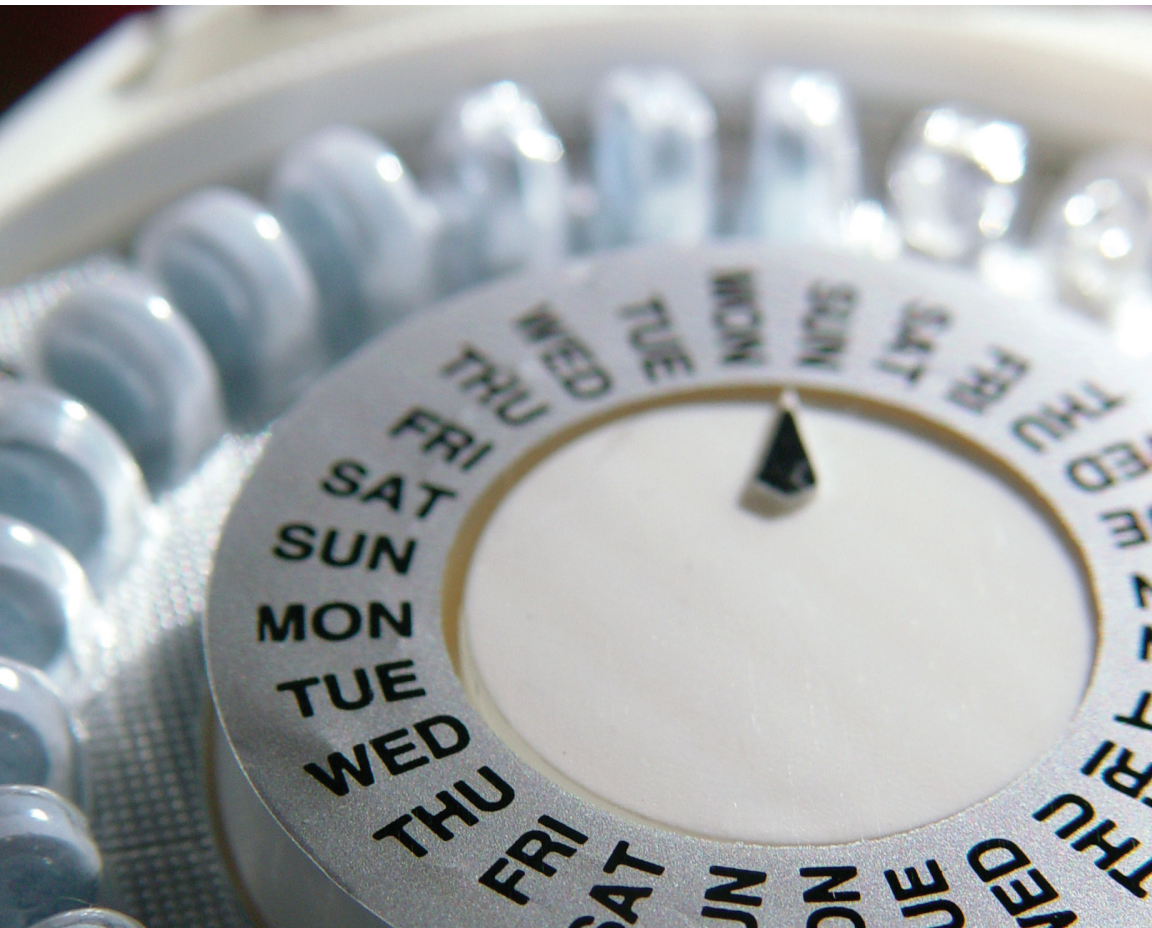


Birth control is something all new mothers should think about—even if they aren't feeling ready to have sex. Talk with your partner about your plans for future babies (if any). Then, talk with your health care provider so he or she can help you choose a method that is right for you.

A Word About Baby Spacing

Research shows that mothers and babies are healthier when mothers wait at least 18 months after giving birth before getting pregnant again. This is particularly true if you had a c-section.

Pregnancies that happen too close to each other can increase the chance of a baby being born too early, increase the chance that a woman will have complications during pregnancy, increase family stress, and strain family finances.





Why is everyone driving me CRAZY?

Your Family

A woman's relationship with her mother and other family members may feel especially important after the birth of a baby. Having a baby can bring up many different feelings. Sometimes having help is good and sometimes it can be hard. It can be even more complicated when in-laws are involved!

It can be wonderful to get the advice of someone who has been through the same things you are going through and who may be able to share helpful tips. It can also be stressful, especially if this advice is unwanted or makes you feel like you don't know what you are doing.

Have visitors? Try making a list of chores and errands that need to be done. For example, have them do a load of laundry, make a meal that can be frozen, or play games with an older child. Think about what you need and ask for it. Grab a nap. If you get advice that is different from what you think is right, it's okay to ask your health care provider or other friends for a second opinion. When in doubt, trust your instincts.



Your Partner

Partners have health and emotional needs too. Some may feel a lot of stress after the birth of a baby. They may need to do more around the house and take care of other children. Some feel worried about money. Many partners are tired too. The birth of a baby can be an event that can bring two people closer together. It can also make them very stressed out! Your partner needs to ask for help too.

Connect with Other Moms

No one knows what you're going through as well as someone who is going through it too. Link up with other moms! Many hospitals, communities, and churches have groups. Check for groups at the library, online, and at your pediatrician's office.



I have a lot of different feelings right now, is that normal?

Having a baby is a really big deal. Mothers often have a lot of different feelings and emotions in the weeks and months after they give birth. These feelings can change often and go from happy to sad to worried to scared and back again. Mothers may find that things affect them more now than they did before.

Most mothers may experience the “baby blues”. They may feel sad and cry easily for a little while after they have a baby. Some mothers experience much stronger feelings. These moms may have postpartum depression. Postpartum depression happens more than most women know. In fact, one out of every ten new mothers has postpartum depression. Postpartum depression can be very serious and prevent you from caring for yourself and your baby. Talk to your healthcare provider if you feel sad, depressed, anxious and of course if you feel like harming yourself or your baby.

You are loved and you are not alone.

- Sleep and rest as often and as much as you can
- Eat nutritious food. Avoid things like alcohol and lots of sugar
- Get out of the house at least once a day – sit on the front porch or go to a friend's house.

If you have one or more of the symptoms below, call your health care provider as soon as you can. There are many ways that they can help you heal. You can also call or text the Postpartum Support International at 1-800-944-4PPD (4773) or visit postpartum.net. With help, you will get better sooner.



Don't be afraid to ask for help if you are...

- Feeling really, really tired almost all the time
- Feeling really worried
- Crying all the time
- Not being able to sleep...even when the baby is asleep
- Having scary thoughts
- Feeling guilty
- Having a change in appetite
- Being so tired and worried that you can't care for the baby
- Not being able to feel happy or to enjoy simple things, like reading a good magazine or catching up with a friend



What if things turned out differently than I hoped?

In spite of our best efforts and dreams, our plans for a healthy pregnancy, the “perfect” delivery, or a healthy baby don’t always work out as hoped. It is very confusing to cope with feelings of loss and sadness at a time in life when you hoped to feel joy.

It is important to give yourself time to grieve after a loss—whether it is the way you thought you would give birth or the way you thought your baby would be. Having a baby born too soon, too small or with a birth defect is especially stressful.

Many people may be afraid to talk to you about what happened to you or your baby. This is very hard for everyone when a mom had health complications or a baby is in an intensive care nursery. When people do talk, they often say the wrong thing.

Some women find it helpful to spend time with mothers going through the same thing they are. Health care professionals as well as social workers and chaplains can help you connect with other mothers and good resources. Some hospitals also provide support groups. Most mothers need time to think about everything that has happened. Many mothers are at risk for post traumatic stress disorder or postpartum depression and should get help.

What might I expect with postpartum health care?

Postpartum health care should offer ongoing support, as helpful to you. The postpartum visit is a check up for you that should happen in the weeks after you give birth. This visit is important because it is to take care of you. The encounter gives you an opportunity to have questions answered and to address your health priorities.

Before this visit, your health care provider should review your records from your pregnancy and birth. During the visit, he or she should do a physical exam, including checking your blood pressure. If you had health problems before or during pregnancy, he or she should also make sure those problems are better or managed. You may also need continual medical care for conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure, that you may still have after the birth of your baby. You may also need immunizations that you weren't able to receive during your pregnancy.

Some women think that if they feel fine they don't need this visit. This isn't true! All moms can benefit from the postpartum visit. Although it may be challenging to make time and get to this visit, you are worth it. Talk with your clinic about finding a time that will work for you. Ask your friends and family for help in making it to this visit. Most providers welcome you bringing your baby to the visit. If you do, it is helpful to bring someone along who can hold the baby during your exam.



Things to think about before your visit

Take a minute to think about anything that you might be worried or curious about. What worries you? What are your family planning goals? Since every person is different, it is important for you to be prepared to ask for what YOU need. Some questions might feel embarrassing, but remember, your provider is an expert in the care of new mothers and is there to help.

Focus on YOU!

The postpartum visit gives you a chance to ask questions about YOUR health and wellness. This visit is usually covered by Medicaid and private insurance groups as part of your pregnancy care. If not, many providers offer a sliding scale fee for this important visit.



Follow Up REQUIRED!

Some women develop conditions, such as high blood pressure, gestational diabetes, and anemia during pregnancy. If you had these conditions, it is very important that you have a postpartum visit. Your health care provider should check to see if these conditions have gone away. Women who have these conditions have an increased chance of having them again in a future pregnancy. They may also be a higher risk of developing diabetes or high blood pressure in the future.

If you have other chronic conditions make an appointment with your doctor. Some medications may need to be changed now that you are not pregnant anymore.

If you had preterm labor, problems during your pregnancy, and/or your baby was born too soon, too small or with birth defects, you may have a lot of questions about what happened. While your provider may not have all the answers, he or she can offer you information that can help. It is okay to ask for what you need to know. You may also want to talk with a genetic counselor or a maternal fetal medicine specialist before you become pregnant again.

When to call your health care provider for help

Mothers who had a c-section may have some extra worries. It can be normal to have a little clear or bloody fluid drain from the incision site. Having some pain is normal. There can also be an odor that may not be familiar to you. If there is a lot of fluid coming from the incision and/or if it is green or looks like pus, call your provider. If you have had a fever $>100.5^{\circ}\text{F}$, pain that is strong and getting worse, if the incision is swollen or red, or if the odor is very bad, call your provider.

If you just aren't feeling right or have worries about your baby, call your clinic. There are a lot of things that might be new for you now.

Alert!

If you have any of these symptoms call 911:

- Pain in chest
- Obstructed breathing or Shortness of Breath
- Seizures
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else

Call your provider if:

- Bleeding, soaking through one pad an hour or blood clots the size of an egg or bigger
- Incision that is not healing
- Red or swollen leg, that is painful or warm to touch
- Temperature of 100.4 or higher
- Headache that does not get better, even after taking medicine, or bad headache with vision changes.



Your baby needs you to be **healthy and well.**

New mothers usually spend a lot of time taking care of their families and other people in their lives. Many mothers also work outside of the home. Mothers very often put their own needs last. While it can be difficult to do, mothers need to take care of themselves too. Investing time and energy in your health is not only good for you, it is good for your baby and family as well. You matter!



Postpartum Visit

Date: _____

Time: _____

My Questions: _____

Important Numbers

Health Care Provider: _____

Nurse or Clinic Call Line: _____

Other Key Numbers: _____



Notes

For great online information, go to
NewMomHealth.com



Collaborative for Maternal and Infant Health



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