

Postpartum Care

What does postpartum mean?

Postpartum is the time when your body recovers from the birth of your baby. It lasts about 6 weeks or until your uterus returns to its normal size.

What special care will I need after my baby is born?

- **Rest:** You will need extra rest. Because you must feed your baby day and night, you may need to change your sleeping schedule to get enough rest. Try to sleep while your baby sleeps. Morning and afternoon naps can be very helpful. Try to get help from friends and family with household chores so you will have extra time to care for your baby and yourself.
- **Pain relief:** Your muscles may be sore from pushing to deliver your baby. If you delivered the baby vaginally, pain in the area between your rectum and vagina is common. Cuts or tears in your vaginal area should heal and stop being painful a week or two after delivery.

To relieve pain and prevent infection in your vaginal area, you can sit in a warm bath, put cloth-covered ice or cold packs on the area, or put warm water on the area with a squirt bottle or sponge. Also be sure to wipe yourself from front to back after bowel movements to prevent infection. If sitting is uncomfortable, you may want to buy a doughnut-shaped pillow at the drugstore to help ease the pressure of sitting.

Nonprescription pain medicine may also help relieve pain. If you are breast-feeding, check with your healthcare provider before you take any medicines.

- **Bleeding and discharge:** It's normal to have a vaginal discharge for 2 to 6 weeks after delivery. Sometimes it may last longer. It may come out in gushes or more like a menstrual period. The discharge may start out red and slowly change to pink and finally a yellow-white color. Use pads instead of tampons for the first 6 weeks after delivery. Avoid tampons because they may bring bacteria into your body and cause infection while your body is still healing. If you had stitches to repair your vaginal skin at delivery, tampons may damage them.
- **Constipation and hemorrhoids:** It's common to be constipated or have discomfort from hemorrhoids after delivery. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist what nonprescription products might help relieve pain and itching. For constipation try eating more foods rich in fiber. Don't use laxatives without first asking your healthcare provider.
- **Urination:** In the first days after delivery you may notice a change in your usual pattern of urination. Your kidneys work harder than usual during this time to get rid of extra fluid that may have built up in your body during pregnancy. Your bladder may be swollen and bruised. This can lead to temporary problems with sensing bladder fullness and can make it harder to empty your bladder completely. To help prevent bladder infections, practice

good hygiene and wipe from front to back after you urinate or have bowel movements. Make regular urination a habit and avoid long waits between the times you empty your bladder. If you have trouble controlling your bladder or you have burning, lower belly pain, back pain, or fever, tell your healthcare provider.

- **Breast soreness:** Your breast milk will come in about 2 to 4 days after your child is born. This may make your breasts engorged and very large, firm, and sore.
 - If you are breast-feeding, your breasts will become less engorged once you start breast-feeding.
 - If you are not breast-feeding, your breasts may be large and painful while you wait for your milk to dry up. To help with pain and discomfort while you wait, wear a bra that gives good support. Put an ice pack, gel pack, or package of frozen vegetables wrapped in a cloth on your breasts for 15 to 20 minutes every 1 to 2 hours while you are awake. Do not pump your breast milk, massage your breasts, or rub your nipples.
- **Headaches:** Many women have headaches during the first few weeks after delivering their baby. Try to get plenty of rest when you can. Be sure to eat meals on a regular schedule. Try to avoid drinks that have a lot of caffeine. You may get some relief by lying down with a cool damp cloth on your forehead, using relaxation techniques such as meditation, or taking nonprescription pain medicines. If you are breast-feeding, check with your healthcare provider before taking any medicines. If your headache is severe or you have changes in your eyesight such as trouble focusing or blurred vision, nausea, vomiting, or weakness in any part of your body, tell your healthcare provider right away.

When can I go back to my normal activities?

If you had a normal delivery without any problems, you can get back to doing most of your usual activities right away. Try to avoid heavy lifting, vacuuming, and a lot of stair climbing for the first couple of weeks.

Exercise is one of the best ways to lose weight, get more energy, relieve stress, and build your strength. Unless you had a C-section, difficult birth, or other pregnancy problem, you can usually start exercising as soon as you feel up to it.

If you had a C-section, ask your healthcare provider how long you need to avoid heavy lifting and when you can start exercising.

When will my period start again?

If you are not breast-feeding your baby, you may start having menstrual periods again 3 to 10 weeks after delivery. If you are breast-feeding, you may not have a period until after 6 months or more of breast-feeding, but it could happen earlier. Some women don't have a period until they stop breast-feeding.

When will I get back to my normal weight?

During birth, you lose about 12 to 14 pounds. However, this may still leave some weight to lose, depending on how much weight you gained during pregnancy. Losing this weight takes time. It takes most women 8 to 12 months to get back to the weight they had before pregnancy. Losing the weight slowly is healthy and natural. The key is to eat healthy and get regular exercise. If you are breast-feeding, you should make sure you are eating at least 1800 calories a day. Because breast-feeding uses a lot of calories, it usually helps women lose their pregnancy weight. Talk to your healthcare provider about a weight-loss plan if you have trouble losing weight.

When can I have sex again?

Ask your healthcare provider how long you should wait before having sex again. Many providers recommend waiting 6 weeks because it takes this long for your uterus to recover from pregnancy and delivery.

Talk to your provider about methods of birth control you can use after the birth of your baby. The method that may be best for you depends on the type of delivery you had, how you are recovering, and if you are breast-feeding. Remember that you can get pregnant before you start having periods again.

What are the postpartum blues?

Many physical and emotional changes happen when you are pregnant and after you give birth. These changes can leave you feeling sad, anxious, afraid, or confused. These feelings are sometimes called "baby blues" and usually start right after your baby is born. Often the feelings start to go away within a week. However, sometimes these feelings may not go away and may get worse. When this happens it's called postpartum depression. Postpartum depression can start right after your baby is born or weeks later. It can be a serious problem and needs treatment. If you feel depressed, unable to care for your baby, or like you want to hurt your baby, talk to your healthcare provider.

When do I need to see my healthcare provider for a checkup?

Your provider will tell you when you need to have a checkup.

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