



Postpartum Healing

Your Emotional and Physical Journey

Postpartum Healing

Your Emotional and Physical Journey

Table of Contents

The Emotional Journey.....	3	Hemorrhoids	8
Healing.....	4	Night Sweats (Temperature)...	8
Finding Support.....	4	Follow-up Visit	8
Postpartum Depression	5	Cesarean	9
Physical Changes	6	Breast Care	10
Postpartum Period	6	Activity	11
Uterus	6	Your Body	12
After-birth Pains.....	6	Weight Loss	12
Lochia	6	Menstrual Cycle	12
Perineal Care	7	Sexual Intimacy.....	12
Bowel Function.....	7	Nutrition	13
When to Call the Doctor.....	7	Family's Grief	14
Episiotomy	8	Resources	15

*My beautiful, precious child so sweet
Forever eternal will you live in my heart...*



Grieving

We wish to express our deepest sympathy to you, your partner, and your family. The death of a baby, born or unborn, is one of life's most unjust tragedies. As you go through this time, remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief and emotional healing have no timetable. Allow yourselves freedom in your emotions and time to heal.

Saving Memories and Honoring Your Baby

- ❖ Consider having photographs taken of your baby.
- ❖ Collect items that remind you of your baby and store them in a special box: ultrasound pictures, hospital bracelet and blanket, a lock of hair, hand and footprints, a record of weight and height, or other special items to treasure as keepsakes.
- ❖ Honor your baby by giving him or her a name.
- ❖ Plant a tree in honor of your baby.
- ❖ Write a poem or letter to your baby telling of your love for him or her.

Going Home

Leaving the hospital can be very difficult. You may feel uneasy going home to face baby items you collected in preparation. You may choose to have someone put all the items away until you are ready to deal with them. If you do not want your baby's items packed up or removed, make your wishes known.

Communicating

While some people feel the need to talk through their grief, others may feel they need to be silent and strong for their partner or family. Give yourself permission to cry and to express your feelings aloud. Remember,

- ❖ unresolved grief can have long-lasting effects on your health and emotional well-being;
- ❖ communication will help you and your family face each day with hope and strength;
- ❖ utilize available resources to help you and your partner through the healing process. Don't go through the grief process alone.

Feeling tired and emotionally drained is a normal response to grief. So is not sleeping or eating well. Try your best to take good care of yourself as you grieve. Encourage your partner to do the same.

- ❖ Get as much rest as you can.
- ❖ Ask for help. Let family and friends assist with meals, household chores, and errands.
- ❖ Go out in the sunlight and get at least 20 minutes of exercise daily to enhance your mood.
- ❖ Talk about your baby and your feelings with your partner, family, and friends.
- ❖ Read books and poems or listen to music that you like and find comforting.
- ❖ Think about having a memorial service.
- ❖ Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- ❖ Create an album or memory box of your baby.
- ❖ Talk about concerns at least weekly with someone you trust. Join a support group.
- ❖ Avoid making any major life changes.
- ❖ Be patient with your partner and with yourself. Not everyone grieves in the same way.



Finding Support

Reaching out for resources to help you cope and heal is not a sign of weakness. It is the right step toward regaining emotional balance in your life. Here are a few of the many resources that can help you and your family:

www.nationalshare.org
www.compassionatefriends.org
www.firstcandle.org/bereavement

www.grieveoutloud.org
www.helpguide.org
www.facesofloss.com

Feelings of deep sadness, anxiousness, loneliness, guilt, and anger are normal feelings of grief. Having trouble sleeping, eating, and thinking straight is also normal. However, when these feelings become intense, last for a long time, or keep you from performing your usual activities, you may have postpartum depression.

The risk of depression after childbirth is greater for women who have lost a child. If you feel sad and hopeless, you are not alone. You have no reason to feel ashamed. The depression is not your fault. The most important step is to talk to your healthcare provider right away if you or your partner notice any symptoms or have had mental health issues in the past. Depression can affect both women and men. It is treatable when you get the support and help you need.

Warning Signs

- ❖ strong feelings of sadness, panic, agitation, or worthlessness
- ❖ blaming yourself unnecessarily for things that go wrong
- ❖ loss of interest, joy, or pleasure in your usual activities or hobbies
- ❖ lack of energy or motivation
- ❖ trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- ❖ overeating or loss of appetite
- ❖ gain or loss of weight
- ❖ trouble focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- ❖ avoidance of family and friends
- ❖ thoughts of hurting yourself or others
- ❖ thoughts of suicide or death



Postpartum Recovery Period

The postpartum period lasts about 6 weeks. It begins with the delivery and ends when the uterus has returned to its prepregnancy state. During this time, your body will go through many changes. You need time to recover and heal. Take one day at a time. Get plenty of rest, eat balanced meals, and take good care of yourself.

Uterus

Immediately after the delivery, the top of your uterus may be at the level of your navel. Within 6 weeks, the uterus will shrink to its normal size. However, your stomach muscles may take a little longer to return to normal.

Contact your healthcare provider if your abdomen is tender to the touch, or if abdominal pain interrupts sleep or activity. These symptoms can indicate an infection.



After-birth Pains

During the first week, you may have after-birth pains or cramps. These contractions compress the blood vessels within the uterus and help prevent excessive bleeding. They are often more noticeable in mothers who have had a previous delivery. The discomfort often goes away after the first week. Use comfort measures such as slow, deep breathing. If you had a vaginal birth, you can apply a warm pack to your lower belly. Your healthcare provider may recommend a pain reliever.

Lochia

The bloody discharge from the vagina after delivery is called lochia. It lasts 3-6 weeks. Use sanitary pads, not tampons.

- ❖ For the first few days after delivery, discharge is bright red and heavy to moderate in amount. You may pass small clots.
- ❖ By the end of the first week, the color will change to dark red-brown. The amount will decrease.
- ❖ By the second or third week, the discharge will be pale pink to straw-colored and slight in amount.
- ❖ By the fourth week, discharge is minimal as the uterus heals.



Perineal Care

The perineum is the area between the vagina and the rectum. After delivery, your perineum may be swollen and tender. If you delivered vaginally, you may notice some mild bruising. Apply ice packs for the first 24 hours to reduce swelling and discomfort. Change sanitary pads often. To reduce the risk of infection, avoid tampons until after your 6-week checkup.

Use a peri-bottle for cleansing when changing sanitary pads, after urination, or after a bowel movement. Fill the bottle with warm water and direct the spray from front to back. Follow by patting dry from front to back. Use the peri-bottle until the discharge stops.

Bowel Function

You should have a bowel movement within 2-3 days after delivery. When you feel the urge for a bowel movement, don't wait. Go to the bathroom right away. To help reduce constipation and keep your stools soft and regular, drink at least 8 glasses of fluid and eat 3-6 servings each of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains each day. Walk and be as active as you can. Moderate exercise will help your bowels return to normal.

Call 911 if you have

- ❖ chest pain, shortness of breath, or trouble breathing
- ❖ seizures
- ❖ thoughts of hurting yourself or others

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have

- ❖ clots the size of an egg or larger
- ❖ bleeding that soaks through 1 pad per hour
- ❖ bleeding that increases in amount or returns to bright red after having been lighter in color
- ❖ a foul odor from the lochia or episiotomy area
- ❖ increased redness, swelling, pain, or pus at incision sites
- ❖ pain or burning with urination
- ❖ severe tenderness, redness, or swelling in your legs or breasts
- ❖ severe headaches or changes in vision
- ❖ a temperature over 100.4°F (38°C)

Episiotomy

An episiotomy is a small incision between the vagina and the rectum that is sometimes made during delivery. You may have stitches from an episiotomy or a vaginal tear. Your stitches will dissolve in about 3 weeks. The area should feel a little better each day.

- ❖ Ice packs and sitz baths will ease the discomfort of your episiotomy.
- ❖ Portable sitz baths may be used 3 times a day for 10-20 minutes.
- ❖ At home, you may use your bathtub as a sitz bath. Clean it well before use and fill with only a few inches of clean, warm water. Roll 2 bath towels into long rolls; sit on the towels for a warm-water soak.
- ❖ Antiseptic spray or antibiotic cream may provide comfort.

Hemorrhoids

Hemorrhoids are swollen veins of the rectum. Pregnancy or labor may cause or aggravate them. Straining during bowel movements can make the problem worse. (See “Bowel Function.”)

- ❖ Alternate lying down with sitting, standing, and walking, as changing positions helps keep pressure off the rectum.
- ❖ Be careful not to do too much in the first two weeks.
- ❖ Use cold compresses, sitz baths, witch hazel pads, and medicated sprays and ointments to reduce swelling and aid pain relief.
- ❖ If these measures do not relieve your discomfort, contact your healthcare provider.

Night Sweats (Temperature)

In the days after delivery, you may feel warmer than usual. It is common to awaken from sleep dripping with perspiration. “Night sweats” are a normal hormonal response. It is the body’s way of getting rid of extra fluids after birth. Night sweats should cease by the end of the first week.

Follow-up Visit

During the first week home, make an appointment with your healthcare provider for a follow-up visit at about 4-6 weeks after delivery. At this appointment, your healthcare provider will check on your physical recovery and emotional well-being, and discuss any needs going forward.

Cesarean delivery involves major abdominal surgery. Recovery will take a little time. Fatigue and nausea during the first few days are normal. For the first few weeks after your Cesarean, limit your activities.

- ❖ Do not overexert yourself. Stair climbing and heavy lifting may strain your incision.
- ❖ Give yourself time to heal. Your activity level will affect muscle soreness.
- ❖ If pain increases, you are doing too much; you need to spend more time resting.

Initially, a dressing will cover your abdominal incision. When the dressing is removed, you will notice the incision is held closed with staples, stitches, steri-strips, or surgical glue. To prevent infection, keep the incision clean and dry. Follow all of your healthcare provider's care instructions.

The normal, bloody vaginal discharge called lochia will continue for some weeks. Change sanitary pads frequently. Use a peri-bottle for cleansing.

Report to Your Healthcare Provider

- ❖ an increase in redness at the incision
- ❖ any drainage or pus-like discharge
- ❖ an opening along the incision
- ❖ an increase in pain at the incision site
- ❖ painful urination or trouble passing stools
- ❖ a temperature over 100.4°F (38°C)

Gas Pain

Constipation and a buildup of gas in the intestines are common problems after a Cesarean delivery. To keep your bowels moving, eat foods high in fiber, drink plenty of water, and walk. Your healthcare provider may prescribe a medication for you. To minimize gas pains,

- ❖ try walking, rocking, and lying on your left side;
- ❖ assume a knees-to-chest position;
- ❖ increase the amount of warm fluids you drink;
- ❖ avoid drinks that are carbonated, very hot, or very cold.



Your breasts may fill with milk 3-4 days after delivery. They may become hard and painful for a few days. If you desire to suppress lactation, these steps can help relieve the discomfort.

Do

- ❖ Wear a supportive bra. If your breasts leak, wear breast pads and change when wet.
- ❖ Apply ice packs every 3-4 hours for 15-20 minutes to reduce swelling.
- ❖ Place cleaned and chilled cabbage leaves in your bra, around your breasts. Replace when they become limp or after 2 hours.
- ❖ Express only a small amount of milk to make your breasts more comfortable.
- ❖ Take a nonaspirin pain medication if approved by your healthcare provider.

Do NOT

- ❖ Apply heat. It may increase swelling. Avoid warm water on breasts during baths.
- ❖ Stimulate the nipples or massage breasts.
- ❖ Bind your breasts. It may increase the risk of infection.
- ❖ Limit your fluid intake. Drink plenty of fluids.

Watch for these signs of infection: hard, red, painful areas on your breast; chills; flu-like symptoms; or a temperature greater than 100.4°F (38°C).

Breast Milk Donation

Some mothers wish to express and donate their breast milk. If you feel this option may be right for you, talk to your healthcare provider.

Breast Self-exam

Breast self-exams are a good way to detect any unusual lumps or changes in your breasts. Examine your breasts once a month, about a week after your period ends. That is when your breasts are less tender or swollen. If you are not having periods, check your breasts on the same day each month. So you can be aware of changes in your breasts and when they occurred, make notes on a calendar every time you check your breasts.



Call your healthcare provider if you notice anything of concern. To learn about breast cancer, early detection, and more, visit www.nationalbreastcancer.org or www.komen.org.

In most cases, the sooner you resume mild activity, such as taking short walks, the better you will feel. However, if you start bleeding more heavily or if bleeding returns to a bright red color, you are doing too much. During the first week,

- ❖ spend half your time resting and off your feet;
- ❖ walk and move around as soon as you feel able;
- ❖ limit stair-climbing to once or twice a day.

Once you are feeling well enough, you can do a little more:

- ❖ Kegel exercises: These exercises will tighten the muscles stretched during delivery, improve bladder control, and help the perineum heal faster. To perform a Kegel, squeeze the muscles that control the flow of urine. Hold for up to 10 seconds and then relax for 6 seconds. Do your Kegel exercises 3-5 times a day, in sets of 10.
- ❖ Leg slides: Lie on your back and bend your knees slightly with your feet flat on the floor. Inhale and slide your right leg into a straight position. Exhale and bend the leg back again. Repeat several times with each leg.
- ❖ Proper posture: Stand up straight and pull your stomach in to take pressure off your back muscles. Relax your neck and shoulders.



Continue to increase activities over the next 6 weeks. Exercising can give you energy, reduce stress, and help you regain your prepregnancy shape. Check with your healthcare provider before starting an exercise program.

Weight Loss

Much of the extra weight you carry after delivery is excess fluid. Your body will naturally begin to shed pounds as your fluid level returns to normal. Be patient and give yourself some time. With the right balance of calories, nutrients, and exercise, you will continue losing pregnancy weight and get back into shape.

Menstrual Cycle

Your menstrual cycle will return in about 6-8 weeks. Your cycle may be irregular for a few months as you continue to heal. For some women, the first period after pregnancy may be longer and more painful than usual.

Sexual Intimacy

Most healthcare providers advise against sexual intercourse until after the vaginal discharge has stopped, and the episiotomy or vaginal tear has healed. You may choose to wait until after your 6-week checkup, and your physical exam report is normal.

While you are still grieving, you may not have much desire for sex. These feelings are normal. Be open with your partner.



- ❖ Holding hands, a gentle touch, a hug, or a kiss can bring comfort to you both. This closeness will make it easier to become intimate again.
- ❖ You and your partner may have different feelings about intimacy. Find ways to be supportive and understanding of each other's needs.
- ❖ Resume a sexual relationship when you are ready. It does not mean that your grief is less overwhelming or life has returned to normal.
- ❖ Some couples find that having sex releases strong feelings they did not expect. It is common and nothing to cause concern.
- ❖ Many women have vaginal dryness. Try using a lubricant, such as a water-soluble cream or jelly.
- ❖ You can get pregnant before you have your first menstrual period.

While you are grieving, you may lose your appetite or feel a desire to over-eat. You should eat at least 3 well-balanced meals per day with 1-2 healthy snacks. Eating the right foods will give you energy, support your physical well-being, and help stabilize your mood.

- ❖ Eat a balanced diet. Include foods from the grain, dairy, protein, fruit, and vegetable groups. Protein snacks every 3-4 hours can help relieve fatigue and blue moods.
- ❖ Limit fats and sweets to avoid “empty calories.” Choose foods that are low-fat, fat-free, or unsweetened, or foods that have no added sugars.
- ❖ Stay hydrated. Keep a bottle of water nearby so you can drink whenever you are thirsty. Limit caffeinated drinks and alcohol.
- ❖ Do not diet. Your body needs nutrients for your healing.
- ❖ If you are not eating well, you may become exhausted or ill. Talk to your healthcare provider about adding vitamins or nutritional supplements to your diet until you feel better.

Find out what your body needs at www.choosemyplate.gov.

Create a profile and receive a meal plan matching your nutritional needs.

Sample Meal Plan

Grains - 6 ounces

Include bread, cereal, rice, and pasta.
Half should be whole grains.

Vegetables - 2½ cups

Eat a variety of veggies.

Fruits - 2 cups

Eat whole fruits. Go light on fruit juices.

Dairy - 3 cups

Include low-fat milk, yogurt, cheese, and/or fortified soy beverages.

Protein - 5½ ounces

Include lean meats, poultry, and seafood, eggs, legumes (beans and peas), nuts, seeds and soy products.

Drink and eat less sodium, saturated fat, and added sugars. Include at least 2½ hours of physical activity in your schedule weekly.



Father or Partner

Every person expresses and copes with grief differently. You may feel the need to be strong for your family and hide your pain. It is important to allow yourself to grieve, too, while providing emotional support.

- ❖ Focus on your partner's needs. Don't overcommit to work or hobbies.
- ❖ Openly share and listen to each other. It is not uncommon in grieving couples for one partner to need connection and the other to pull away. Communication is vital.
- ❖ Set aside a "date night" each week to bond and share closeness.
- ❖ Give your partner frequent and tender, nonsexual affection.

Siblings

Children grieve the loss of a baby just as adults do—with feelings of sadness, fear, guilt, and anger. Help your children process their emotions and heal in these ways:

- ❖ Allow them to see you grieve. It is okay and normal to be sad.
- ❖ Share honest, age-appropriate information about death.
- ❖ Encourage your child to ask questions. Listen and accept your child's feelings.
- ❖ Assure your child that he or she did not cause their sibling's death.

Grandparents

Grandparents are sometimes the forgotten grievers. They grieve the death of their grandchild. In addition, they grieve for their adult child

and for their inability to "fix" the situation. Grandparents want to provide emotional support for you and your family, but at times they may not say what you want or need to hear. Let your parents know how you feel and how they can help. For resources, see "Finding Support" on page 4.



Postpartum Support International

1-800-944-4773

www.postpartum.net

Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

1-800-994-9662

www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/get-help-now

Bibliography


American Academy of Pediatrics. *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5*. (6th ed.) New York: Bantam, 2014.

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). *Your Pregnancy and Childbirth*. (6th ed.) Washington, DC: ACOG, 2015.

Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN). *The Compendium of Postpartum Care*. (2nd ed.) Washington, DC: AWHONN, 2006.

Langan, RC and Goodbred, AJ. "Identification and Management of Peripartum Depression." *American Family Physician* (2016) 93(10): 852-8.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. ChooseMyPlate. Accessed August 1, 2018. <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>.



Postpartum Healing: Your Emotional and Physical Journey is provided to help you and your family know what to expect in the next few days and weeks. It addresses some frequently asked questions about postpartum healing. It provides a few resources to help you and your family during this time of grief.

You are beginning the journey to accepting and living with the death of your precious baby. You will never forget your loss. Your baby will live on in your heart and will forever be a part of your family.

Topics include:

Emotional and Physical Healing

Your Body

Postpartum Depression

Breast Care

Physical Changes

Nutrition

Activity and Exercise

Family Grief

When to Call Your Healthcare Provider

Finding Support

This booklet contains general information about postpartum care and is not meant to be used for diagnosis, treatment, or as a substitute for medical attention. If you have questions or concerns about your health, contact your healthcare provider or medical facility immediately. Your healthcare providers can answer your questions about the contents of this booklet.