

Taking care of YOU

Your Postpartum Health and Visit



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A Message to You

Mothers carry part of their baby with them forever – in their heart and sometimes with souvenirs on their body. You have just been through a life changing experience. Having a baby 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.

No More Secrets!

The problems and discomforts a woman experiences after having a baby are not often talked about. This doesn't mean that they are not common. It's okay to feel worried about these symptoms and to get advice about how to deal with them.

Why am I having so many backaches and headaches?

Some new mothers experience headaches after they have a baby. This can be caused by the shifting hormones in your body as it returns to normal. Lack of sleep and the stress of being a new mother can also cause headaches.

Breastfeeding and the extra weight of full breasts can contribute to backaches. Be sure to wear a good, supportive bra. Pay attention to how 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. If your headache doesn't get better with ibuprofen, call your provider.





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, extra 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 and 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. Alternating ice packs with warm tub soaks will 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 six weeks postpartum, your provider should check to make sure there is not a problem with the healing process.

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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 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 bright 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.

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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 abnormally heavy bleeding (saturating a sanitary pad in an hour or having blood clots bigger than a golf ball) or if the lochia has a foul smelling odor.

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 (Tuck's™) are usually recommended. 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.

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Constipation is a common and usually short-lived 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 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. 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.

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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!

Hopefully, you have already had some information from a nurse or a lactation consultant to help you get started with breastfeeding. Some common concerns during the first few weeks postpartum (after delivery) include engorgement (breasts getting too full), sore and cracked nipples, plugged ducts, mastitis (breast infection), and yeast infection to name a few. While these problems can cause pain and make you want to stop breastfeeding, there are many things that can be done to help.

For example:

- Use ice packs and ibuprofen for engorgement.
- Try massage, feeding your baby often, a heating pad or ibuprofen for clogged ducts or mastitis.
- 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 nursing 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 that feel warm to the touch.



Breastfeeding and/or expressing breast milk can be difficult for some women. If you are having trouble feeding your baby this way, 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 (llofnc.org). You can also call the hospital where you had your baby. Another resource is the National Breastfeeding Information Line 1-800-994-9662 or 4woman.gov/breastfeeding. You can also call 1-877-452-5324 for help 24 hours a day.

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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 for up to six months. 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 be sure to use extra 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 like your partner is helping you.

Why do I still look pregnant?

It takes at least six weeks for your uterus to shrink back to its normal size. This happens slowly and needs time to happen.

Many women may find that the rest of their “baby weight” does not go away so easily. “Getting your body back” is a common goal among new mothers. This can be hard when you’re tired and stressed. Losing weight slowly is one good approach. 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 losing weight. 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 get back in shape at the same time. Some women lose weight quickly when they breastfeed. Others may hold on to some extra weight until they stop. Moms who breastfeed need to eat extra calories everyday. Talk to your provider about a weight loss plan that will be safe for you.

Remember, the time it takes women to return to their original weight is different for everyone.





Exercise?

But I can't even get a shower!

Start slowly. Try walking around your neighborhood or a local mall. See if you can find some friends or maybe another new mom 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!

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Check out great tips and tools at
www.myeatsmartmovemore.com

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

I need birth control, already?!

Did you know that...

- Some women can get pregnant again just six weeks 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

Men have health and emotional needs too. Some dads 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 dads 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! Dads need 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 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 or depressed.



Experts suggest that all new mothers:

- Sleep and rest as often and as much as they 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 get through this difficult time. You can also call the Postpartum Support Network at 1-800-944-4PPD (4773) or visit www.postpartum.net.

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 when most women 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 people when 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 resources and support groups. Most mothers need time to think about everything that has happened. Many mothers are at risk for postpartum depression and should get help if they are having the symptoms described in this booklet.

What is a postpartum visit?

The postpartum visit is a check up that should happen in the weeks after you give birth. This visit is important because it gives your provider a chance to make sure you are ok, to answer your questions, and to help you with your family planning goals.

During this visit, your health care provider should review your records from your pregnancy and birth. He or she should do a physical exam, check your blood pressure, and your weight. If you had health problems during pregnancy, he or she should also make sure those problems have gotten better. 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 need this visit. Younger mothers, single moms, and moms with more than one child may have challenges getting to this visit. 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 don't mind if you bring your baby to the visit but it is best to bring someone along who can hold the baby during your exam.

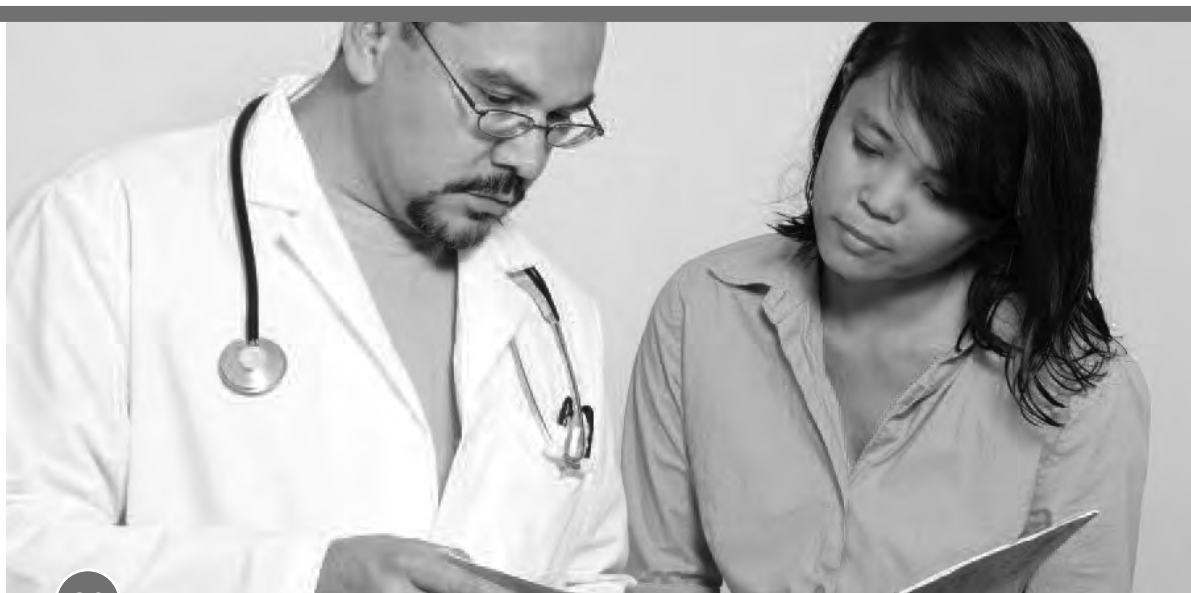


Things to think about before your visit

Take a minute to think about anything that you might be worried or curious about. What are your family planning goals? Since every woman 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 should be part of your prenatal care package and 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 any more.

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, it is okay to call. There are a lot of things that might be new for you now.

Alert!

If you have any of these symptoms call your provider now:

- High fever
- Sharp pain in your breast with a red spot or red streaks
- Pus coming out of your c-section area or
lots of swelling there
- Severe shortness of breath
- Blurry vision
- Feeling like you are going to hurt yourself or your baby
- Severe headache



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.



Postpartum Visit

Date: _____

Time: _____

My Questions: _____

[illegible]

Important Numbers

Health Care Provider: _____

Nurse or Clinic Call Line: _____

Other Key Numbers: _____

March of Dimes website: marchofdimes.com



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for great online information go to
www.everywomannc.org



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This material is for information purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. The opinions expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the March of Dimes. Funding for this publication was supported in part by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and a community grant from the March of Dimes North Carolina Chapter. Funding for printing this publication was made possible (in part) by grant award H5MMC10862 from the Health Resources and Services Administration.

25,000 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$7,537.67 or \$0.30 each (4/15).