

After Your Delivery (the Postpartum Period): Care Instructions



Your Care Instructions

Congratulations on the birth of your baby. Like pregnancy, the newborn period can be a time of excitement, joy, and exhaustion. You may look at your wondrous little baby and feel happy. You may also be overwhelmed by your new sleep hours and new responsibilities.

At first, babies often sleep during the days and are awake at night. They do not have a pattern or routine. They may make sudden gasps, jerk themselves awake, or look like they have crossed eyes. These are all normal, and they may even make you smile.

In these first weeks after delivery, try to take good care of yourself. It may take 4 to 6 weeks to feel like yourself again, and possibly longer if you had a Cesarean birth. You will likely feel very tired for several weeks. Your days will be full of ups and downs, but lots of joy as well.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

Take care of your body after delivery

- Use pads instead of tampons for the bloody flow that may last as long as 2 weeks.
- Ease cramps with ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin).
- Ease soreness of hemorrhoids and the area between your vagina and rectum with ice compresses or witch hazel pads.
- Ease constipation by drinking lots of fluid and eating high-fiber foods. Ask your doctor about over-the-counter stool softeners.
- Cleanse yourself with a gentle squeeze of warm water from a bottle instead of wiping with toilet paper.
- Take a sitz bath in warm water several times a day.
- Wear a good nursing bra. Ease sore and swollen breasts with warm, wet washcloths.
- If you are not breastfeeding, use ice rather than heat for breast soreness.
- Your period may not start for several months if you are breastfeeding. You may bleed more, and longer at first, than you did before you got pregnant.
- Wait until you are healed (about 4 to 6 weeks) before you have sexual intercourse. Your doctor will tell you when it is okay to have sex.
- Try not to travel with your baby for 5 or 6 weeks. If you take a long car trip, make frequent stops to walk around and stretch.

Avoid exhaustion

- Rest every day. Try to nap when your baby naps.
- Ask another adult to be with you for a few days after delivery.
- Plan for child care if you have other children.
- Stay flexible so you can eat at odd hours and sleep when you need to. Both you and your baby are making new schedules.
- Plan small trips to get out of the house. Change can make you feel less tired.
- Ask for help with housework, cooking, and shopping. Remind yourself that your job is to care for your baby.

Know about help for postpartum depression

- "Baby blues" are common for the first 1 to 2 weeks after birth. You may cry or feel sad or irritable for no reason.

- Rest whenever you can. Being tired makes it harder to handle your emotions.
- Go for walks with your baby.
- Talk to your partner, friends, and family about your feelings.
- If your symptoms last for more than a few weeks, or if you feel very depressed, ask your doctor for help.
- Postpartum depression can be treated. Support groups and counseling can help. Sometimes medicine can also help.

Stay healthy

- Eat healthy foods so you have more energy and lose extra baby pounds.
- If you breastfeed, avoid drugs. If you quit smoking during pregnancy, try to stay smoke-free. If you choose to have a drink now and then, have only one drink, and limit the number of occasions that you have a drink. Wait to breastfeed at least 2 hours after you have a drink to reduce the amount of alcohol the baby may get in the milk.
- Start daily exercise after 4 to 6 weeks, but rest when you feel tired.
- Learn exercises to tone your belly. Do Kegel exercises to regain strength in your pelvic muscles. You can do these exercises while you stand or sit.
 - Squeeze the same muscles you would use to stop your urine. Your belly and thighs should not move.
 - Hold the squeeze for 3 seconds, and then relax for 3 seconds.
 - Start with 3 seconds. Then add 1 second each week until you are able to squeeze for 10 seconds.
 - Repeat the exercise 10 to 15 times for each session. Do three or more sessions each day.
- Find a class for new mothers and new babies that has an exercise time.
- If you had a Cesarean birth, give yourself a bit more time before you exercise, and be careful.

When should you call for help?

Call anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have thoughts of harming yourself, your baby, or another person.
- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You have chest pain, are short of breath, or cough up blood.
- You have a seizure.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have severe vaginal bleeding. This means you are passing blood clots and soaking through a pad each hour for 2 or more hours.
- You are dizzy or lightheaded, or you feel like you may faint.
- You have a fever.
- You have new or more belly pain.
- You have signs of a blood clot in your leg (called a deep vein thrombosis), such as:
 - Pain in the calf, back of the knee, thigh, or groin.
 - Redness and swelling in your leg or groin.
- You have signs of preeclampsia, such as:
 - Sudden swelling of your face, hands, or feet.
 - New vision problems (such as dimness, blurring, or seeing spots).
 - A severe headache.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- Your vaginal bleeding seems to be getting heavier.
- You have new or worse vaginal discharge.
- You feel sad, anxious, or hopeless for more than a few days.
- You do not get better as expected.

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