

POSTPARTUM CARE FOR MOM

In your first few weeks at home, your baby is not the only one who may need some extra care and attention. Postpartum care for mom is just as important. Your goal for the weeks after you deliver is to NEST: Nurse, Eat, Sleep, and Talk. The best place to NEST is often in the comfort of your own home.

HEALTH NOTES



For more information

Visit kp.org/maternity

Visit kp.org/pregnancy

- Read about how to care for you and your baby at home.

Visit kp.org/health

- Type “postpartum care” in the search box.

Call Kaiser Permanente Medical Advice

Talk to your medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling **(703) 359-7878** or **(800) 777-7904**. TTY: **(885) 632-8278**.

Contact the Newborn Care Center

- Baltimore area (410) 737-5464
- Washington DC and suburban Maryland (866) 264-4766
- Northern Virginia (703) 922-1469

Recovering from birth and adjusting to life as a new mom takes time. It may take four to six weeks for you to feel like yourself again. It may take even longer if you have a Cesarean delivery. Try to take good care of yourself during these weeks.

The time at home after delivery should be spent resting and regaining energy while enjoying your baby with your family. It is normal to feel tired and a little overwhelmed at times after delivery. Feeling a little let down after the excitement of pregnancy and delivery is also normal. While you are recovering, reassign household tasks and encourage your spouse or support person to take an active role in the baby's care.

Care of vaginal tears and episiotomies

During a vaginal delivery, it is not uncommon for tears to occur in the vaginal area. Many of these tears are small and do not require treatment. Larger tears, or an episiotomy (a small cut made to enlarge the opening of the vagina during delivery), will require repair. Immediately after delivery, the tear will be repaired with stitches. Use an ice pack for the first 24 hours to relieve pain and swelling around the area of the stitches. Sitting in warm, shallow water, or a sitz bath, for 15 to 20 minutes three times a day also relieves discomfort. After urinating or having a bowel movement, remember to rinse the area with warm water from your peri-bottle, and pat it dry afterwards. The stitches used for repair do not need to be removed. They will dissolve on their own. You may notice tiny pieces on the toilet tissue. This is normal.

C-section care

A cesarean section, commonly called a C-section, is surgery to deliver your baby through an incision (cut) in your lower belly and uterus. It is important to keep your C-section incision clean and dry while it heals. You may need to take pain medicine to relieve pain in your lower belly for the first few weeks after your C-section. During your recovery, a friend or family member should help with grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning. Try not to lift anything heavier than your baby and avoid activities that put strain on the incision area. It is helpful to use a pillow to support your lower belly while standing and while holding or breastfeeding your baby. If your incision was closed using staples, they will need to be removed. If the staples were not removed in the hospital, make an appointment as soon as you are discharged home. Staple removal is done in the OB department within 7-10 days.

Vaginal bleeding

When you are pregnant, your uterus increases in size to hold your growing baby. After delivery, it takes about four to six weeks for your uterus to return to its regular size. Sometimes, you may feel menstrual-like cramps and have increased bleeding, which you may notice more during breastfeeding. This means your uterus is shrinking back to its regular size. This process is called *involution*.

During involution, you can expect to have bloody discharge from the vagina. Postpartum bleeding, or *lochia*, will be bright red for several days. Gradually the lochia will turn to dark brown, then light-pink or yellow in color and become lighter in amount. You may also pass small (dime-size) blood clots during this time. Use pads instead of tampons to absorb the flow.

Call your doctor or a Medical Advice nurse if:

- vaginal bleeding is getting heavier and still bright-red after four days,
- you are passing large (quarter-size) blood clots over several hours,
- vaginal bleeding is soaking through a new pad every hour for more than two hours,
- vaginal discharge has a foul odor,
- you have a fever of 100.4° F or higher,
- you feel pelvic or lower belly pain, or
- bloody discharge lasts more than six weeks.

Mastitis in breastfeeding moms

Mastitis is swelling of the breast due to an infection. It can be caused when bacteria enter the breast through a cracked nipple. Another cause is milk build-up in the breast that leaks to surrounding tissue. Mastitis usually starts as a painful area in the breast that is red and warm to the touch. You may also feel run-down and feverish. Call a medical advice nurse promptly, since early treatment can prevent a breast abscess. Treatment for mastitis consists of antibiotics to clear up the infection, rest, and frequent breastfeeding.

If you have any breastfeeding questions or challenges, an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) can give you personal

breastfeeding education and support. Contact the Newborn Care Center at the numbers on the front page of this Health Note for more information.

Urinary tract infections

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are caused by bacterial infections in the urethra or bladder. You may feel the urge to urinate often but not let out much urine when you use the toilet. Other common signs of a UTI are urine with a foul odor and feeling pain or a burning sensation when you urinate. The infection can be cured with antibiotics. Drinking plenty of water can also help to clear out the bacteria in your system.

Gestational hypertension (high blood pressure) after delivery

Gestational hypertension, also called “pregnancy induced hypertension,” occurs in about one in 14 pregnancies. Usually it begins during the third trimester and goes away once the baby is born. Rarely, women develop gestational hypertension soon *after* delivery.

Call a medical advice nurse if you have any of the following symptoms:

- strong headache that does not improve with pain reliever,
- blurry or double vision or “seeing spots,”
- sudden increase in swelling – especially in hands, feet or face,
- severe pain in your upper belly, or
- nausea and vomiting

If you have gestational hypertension, it may take up to six weeks after delivery for your blood pressure levels to return to normal. During this time, your doctor may prescribe a medicine as treatment.

Perinatal mood and anxiety disorders

It is absolutely normal to feel a range of emotions after delivering your baby. A lack of rest, hormonal changes, and the physical and emotional stress of birthing can all contribute to feeling down, tired, or overwhelmed. Call the behavioral health advice line at **(866) 530-8778** or **(800) 777-7904** if you continue to feel sad or anxious for longer

than 2 weeks after your baby is born. You may have a perinatal mood and anxiety disorder which happens to about 15% of pregnant and postpartum women. Perinatal mood and anxiety disorders can be successfully treated with counseling, medicine or both.

Resuming sexual intercourse

Whether you gave birth vaginally or by cesarean, your body needs time to heal. Most doctors suggest waiting until after your five-week postpartum visit before having sex. This allows time for the cervix to close and the episiotomy or small tears to heal. Talk to your doctor at your five-week postpartum visit about when it is safe for you to resume sexual intercourse.

This is also a good time to talk to your doctor about your family planning options. Even if you are breastfeeding and have not had your first period since delivery, you can still get pregnant. Use condoms with spermicide to protect yourself from becoming pregnant if you are not using another form of birth control.

Even once you are healed and have an effective method of family planning, it may be hard to find time and energy for sex. Feeling sleep-deprived, changes in body image and physical discomfort may affect your sex drive. Be open with your partner about how you're feeling and follow your own timeline.

Getting rest

Getting enough rest is extremely important for your physical and emotional recovery after your baby is born. Being a new mom can be a tough job. Give yourself a break!

- Rest when the baby is sleeping.
- Ask someone else to prepare meals, do housework, and run errands.
- Limit visitors to a certain time of the day or day of the week.

Regaining a healthy shape and weight

- Eat fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean meats or fish.
- Drink an 8-ounce glass of fluid 8 to 10 times a day.
- If you are breastfeeding, add one healthy snack each day.
- Continue taking prenatal vitamins as long as you are breastfeeding.
- As soon as you are able, begin to take short walks outside with your baby (weather permitting).

Your postpartum visit

All moms need a follow-up visit five weeks after delivery with their OB/GYN doctor. It is a good idea to write down any questions or concerns you have for your doctor ahead of time.

To make an appointment, call (703) 359-7878 or (800) 777-7904. TTY: (885) 632-8278.

Your health and your ability to care for yourself and your baby can be seriously affected by violence or abuse. If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, there is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-7233 or visit thehotline.org.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent medical problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor or member of your health care team.