

Taking Care of Yourself After Giving Birth

Congratulations on the birth of your baby! Now that you are no longer pregnant, your body is going through many changes. The information in this section may help you as these changes take place.

Early Days at Home

One of our Maternity and Infant Center nurses may call you at home to see how you and your baby are doing. They will answer any questions you have.

Your Follow-up Care

You will need to have a follow-up visit with your healthcare provider. Most times, this visit occurs 6 weeks after giving birth, whether the birth was vaginal or Cesarean. Your provider may ask you to come in sooner.

Do not miss this important visit! At your follow-up visit, your healthcare provider will check to make sure you have recovered from pregnancy and birth. We can help you make this appointment if you are seeing a provider in our healthcare system.

Physical Changes

Uterine Cramps

You may have abdominal (uterine) cramps in the days after your baby's birth. These "after pains" are caused by your uterus shrinking back to the size it was before pregnancy. They are strongest for the first 2 or 3 days and then start to ease. Please read the chapter "Pain Control After Vaginal Delivery" in this book for more information.



After your baby's birth, remember that you need to take care of yourself, as well as caring for your new infant.



Breastfeeding often helps lessen breast swelling and tenderness.

Breast Swelling and Leaking

Right after birth, your breasts make a special milk called *colostrum*. Your milk volume will grow within 1 to 3 days and change to mature milk.

You may have breast swelling and tenderness when your milk “comes in” (fills your breasts). This is called *engorgement*. Read the chapter called “Comfort Measures for Engorgement of the Breasts,” and keep feeding your baby often.

If your breasts continue to be painful or swollen and hard, or you have other concerns about breastfeeding your baby, please call your healthcare provider or UWMC’s Lactation Services at 206.598.4628.

If you need to “dry up” your milk, the discomfort of breast fullness will last a couple of days, until you stop producing milk. To ease this discomfort, try:

- Wearing a snug bra
- Putting ice packs on your breasts several times a day
- Putting a binder around your breasts

To bind your breasts, wrap a towel or long piece of cloth tightly around your chest and pin it closed.

Your healthcare provider may also recommend a mild pain medicine.

Whether you are breastfeeding or bottle feeding, your breasts may leak milk. Put a soft handkerchief or a nursing pad (not plastic-lined) inside your bra to soak up the milk and keep it from leaking onto your clothes.

Vaginal Bleeding and the Return of Your Period

After childbirth, the bleeding from your vagina is blood from the area where the placenta was attached to your uterus and from the lining of your uterus.

The flow is usually heavy and bright red for the first few days. Then it changes to a pinkish color, then to brown. **If the flow ever has a bad smell, call your healthcare provider right away.**

The amount of bleeding decreases as the days and weeks pass. If you have an increase in the amount of blood or it is red again, you need to rest more. The flow of blood from your vagina may continue as long

as 6 weeks after your baby's birth. Panty liners and pads are best to use. Tampons, feminine sprays, or douches are not advised.

If you are only breastfeeding your baby and not giving any bottles, your period (menstruation) may not begin again for several months. If you are bottle-feeding, your period could begin in 6 to 8 weeks.

If you have no bleeding after the first 8 weeks and you are only breastfeeding for the first 6 months, the risk of getting pregnant is very low (less than 2%, or 2 out of 100 women). But, we strongly suggest that you use birth control after your baby is born, whether or not you are breastfeeding.

Leg Swelling

Swelling in your legs is common after giving birth. It should go away in 7 to 10 days. To help with swelling:

- Sit with your legs propped up to help the swelling go down.
- Do not wear tight-fitting shoes or clothing.

Call your healthcare provider if your leg swelling gets worse, or if you have leg pain or redness in the lower part of your leg.

Vaginal Tears or Episiotomy

You may have stitches from a vaginal tear or an *episiotomy* (a cut your care provider made at the opening of your vagina just before the birth). Be sure to keep the area clean.

Rinse the area well with warm water each time you go to the bathroom. Use the squirt bottle you received in the hospital until you do not have any vaginal bleeding or discharge. Your stitches will dissolve in a couple of weeks. Also read the chapter "Pain Control After Vaginal Delivery" in this book.

Hemorrhoids

You may develop *hemorrhoids* (inflamed veins in the rectum) late in pregnancy. They may get irritated during delivery. Make sure you tell your doctor or nurse if you have hemorrhoids. There are medicines and treatments that can ease the discomfort. Most hemorrhoids that form in pregnancy go away after the birth. Read the chapter "Pain Control After Vaginal Delivery" in this book to learn more.



Wait until you have had your 6-week checkup to go jogging, do aerobics, or do any other very active exercise.

Feeling Tired

You will probably feel tired in the days after your baby's birth. The birth itself is hard work and can use up your energy reserves. Your baby will feed every few hours in the first days and weeks at home.

Try to get as much rest as possible. Nap when you can. Try to sleep when your baby is sleeping.

Emotional Changes

The “baby blues” are emotional changes you may have after your baby's birth. Please see the chapter “Baby Blues and More.”

Activity and Exercise

For the next few weeks, take care of yourself and your baby. Ask for help when you need it, and be sure to accept help when it is offered!

Wait until you have had your 6-week checkup to begin or go back to jogging, aerobics, or other very active exercise. A slow return to your normal activities will help you recover and keep you from getting too tired.

Kegel Exercises

Kegel exercises help heal and strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. Learn to do these when you are urinating. Begin to pass your urine, then stop the flow by tightening your muscles. Hold as long as you can, up to 30 seconds, then let go and finish urinating.

Once you learn how to do these exercises, tighten and relax these same muscles several times a day when you are **not** urinating.

Nutrition

A well-balanced, healthy diet will help you heal and build and maintain a good milk supply. Dieting to lose weight is not good to do for the first 6 weeks after you give birth. Talk with your healthcare provider about your nutritional needs.

It can be difficult to cope with preparing meals and taking care of a newborn. Keeping a supply of healthy snacks on hand can help.

Iron Supplements

Some women may need to take iron supplements if they have anemia or a low blood count. Your healthcare provider may

prescribe them for you along with ascorbic acid (vitamin C). The vitamin C helps your body absorb the iron.

Immunizations After Pregnancy

After giving birth, it is safe for you to receive vaccines, even if you are breastfeeding. Several vaccines can help protect your new baby from getting serious illnesses such as whooping cough. Your healthcare providers will talk with you and answer your questions about any vaccines that you can receive at the hospital.

Resuming Sexual Activity

Couples differ in their readiness to resume intercourse. Some are ready as soon as possible after the birth, and others prefer to wait or may even feel afraid. Many factors, including vaginal or Cesarean pain, the demands of parenting, and extreme fatigue, may affect a couple's ability to relax and enjoy making love.

It is important to wait until your cervix has closed, which takes about 2 weeks. After that, it is probably safe to have intercourse when your stitches heal, your vaginal discharge disappears, and you feel ready. Be sure to use birth control, since you could get pregnant.

You may feel sore at first. You may also have vaginal dryness due to hormone changes. A water-soluble lubricant can help.

Family Planning

To help make your best decision about planning your family, see the chapter "Your Family Planning." Check with your insurance provider about your family planning coverage.

Questions?

Your questions are important. If you have questions about taking care of yourself, call your healthcare provider during office hours.

If you have an urgent concern, call UWMC Labor & Delivery at 206.598.4616.

If you have a medical emergency call 911.

