

Introduction

Well, you've had your baby. You might have prepared for this moment by attending birthing classes or by watching videos. But, nothing could have ever prepared you for the moment when they handed you your baby. You probably marveled at your incredible ability to create such a precious life.

But, now you may dwell on more practical thoughts. Your body may feel different. Your stomach may still be swollen and tender. As new hormones turn on and others turn off, you may experience different emotions. You may feel sore and bruised. And as you begin to breastfeed, your breasts may experience new sensations, too.

Childbirth definitely takes its toll on your body. One wise physician once said, "It takes nine months to make a baby, and it will take at least that for your body to return to normal."

Much of your work will now be caring for your newest family member. You will be learning so much about him. But, you will also need to take care of yourself. Healing after childbirth takes time and involves your body, mind and soul. A new baby affects everyone, and lots of adjustments will be made over the next several weeks.

How Will I Feel After The Birth?

Childbirth is a completely different experience for each woman.

Women feel so many things after having a baby. If your labor was long, you may feel exhausted and weak. If you had a caesarean birth, you may feel stiff and sore.

You may also experience intense joy at meeting your precious little one for the first time. Then again, you might also feel a little fear at the thought of caring for your baby after you leave the hospital. These feelings are completely normal. You just went through an intense physical and emotional experience, and you will feel many different emotions afterward.

You will certainly feel relief that the birth is over and excitement at the new life that lies ahead!

Let Me Out Of Bed!

Many moms have a desire to get on their feet and move around after having their babies. As soon as you can, walking is a great idea.

Walking speeds up the healing process and shows the nurses and doctors that you are recovering. It also makes you feel better. In most hospitals, you can walk around the maternity ward while pushing your baby in the bassinet.

Check with your doctor or nurse before you attempt to get out of bed. They will let you know when it is safe to get up. If you had a complicated or caesarean delivery, you may not be able to get up as soon as you would like.

Will I Hurt?

Hurting during and after childbirth is every mom's concern. The recovery process is not without its aches and pains.

Your body begins to spring back after having your baby. While you were pregnant, your bones and ligaments softened to prepare for birth. Afterward, your progesterone levels drop back to normal, and your body may ache as you recover.

There are other factors involved with childbirth that may cause you discomfort until the healing process is complete. You should have a doctor's checkup 4 to 6 weeks after delivery. You can discuss any concerns you may have at that time.

Uterus and Vagina

After your baby is born, your uterus begins to shrink back to how it was before you became pregnant. Right after birth, the nurses will massage your uterus to help it contract. These contractions are a bit uncomfortable, but help keep the uterus from bleeding more than it should.

These "after birth" pains may feel a bit like labor. They can last for several days until the uterus shrinks. Applying a warm compress to your tummy, or lying for a short time on a warm heating pad can help ease the discomfort.

Breastfeeding also helps the uterus contract back to its original size.

You will also experience discomfort in the vaginal area. It can take up to 3 weeks for the stretching and tearing (if any) to heal. You will also experience a vaginal discharge called lochia. At first, it's mixed with blood, but then it becomes brownish. It can continue anywhere from 2 to 6 weeks. Rest helps to lessen the flow and shorten the duration of the bleeding. If you notice excessive bleeding or a foul odor, call your doctor.

How long before it is possible to become pregnant again? You can get pregnant as soon as ovulation takes place. Since ovulation occurs two weeks before your period starts, you can become pregnant before you have your first period. It is impossible to predict when your body will ovulate after childbirth. If you are breastfeeding, you may not have a period for 6 or more weeks. In other women, it could occur within 4 to 10 weeks.

Episiotomy or Tears

The area between the vagina and rectum, called the perineum (pronounced pair-in-e-um) can become sore from stretching, tearing or cutting.

A cut in the perineum is called an "episiotomy". It is done to prevent you from tearing when the tissue becomes over stretched in childbirth. The stitched area can be sore, especially after a bowel movement. You will need to keep this area clean and wear cotton underwear that will allow it to breathe and heal. The stitches usually dissolve in about two weeks. Your doctor will give you instructions on how to care for this area and what you can do to ease the discomfort.

Tearing also usually requires stitches and needs to be cared for just like an episiotomy. Tearing can take a little longer to heal, which is why most doctors prefer to do an episiotomy if they think you will tear.

Hemorrhoids and Constipation

What a way to put a damper on your joyful day! Hemorrhoids and constipation do often accompany childbirth. Hemorrhoids are swollen veins in your anal area and can become painful and bleed. To avoid them, eat high fiber foods and drink lots of water. Ice packs and hemorrhoid pads can relieve the pain.

Changes to Your Breasts

Your breasts will change shape due to pregnancy hormones. After your baby is born, other hormones will allow your breasts to produce all the milk your baby needs. As his needs change, so will the amount of your milk.

Your baby can nurse even before your milk comes in. Your breasts will produce a nutritious, creamy yellow fluid called colostrum. This helps to build his immune system, helping him to fight infection.

After a few days, your breasts will begin to produce milk. They will become larger and possibly feel hard and uncomfortable. Relief will come when your baby nurses.

You may experience tenderness in your nipples until you adjust to your baby nursing. To help ease the discomfort, wear a nursing bra and use breast pads to absorb any leaking milk. The pads will keep your nipples dry and reduce irritation.

If you have any questions on breastfeeding, consult a lactation nurse. Many hospitals can provide you with an appointment.

When your baby nurses, milk is released from the sacs of the milk-producing glands and pushed through the ducts into sinuses just behind the nipple.

Other Concerns

Other changes to your body that are less painful are stretch marks, hair loss and skin color.

Stretch marks will fade to a silvery white over time. Depending on your skin type, eventually you may barely notice them.

Hormonal changes after birth often lead to hair loss or thinning. However, during pregnancy, you probably noticed that your hair got thicker. This thinning is temporary, and your hair will return to normal.

Skin color changes that occurred during pregnancy will fade within a few months.

Getting Back Into Shape

Getting back into shape is every mom's concern. You will want to concentrate on strengthening muscles affected by pregnancy. Abdominal crunches, leg lifts and Kegal exercises help to speed your recovery. Also, good posture helps to prevent back pain.

Baby Blues

Coming home with your baby can be a stressful time for moms. Caring for your baby and understanding his needs are both rewarding but can also be frustrating. You may feel many emotions. Within 3 days, over 70 percent of new moms experience mood swings and mild depression. This is called the "baby blues." It is completely normal and will eventually go away after you settle in and begin to get more rest.

If your blues last longer than a few weeks and become worse, make sure you call your doctor and ask family members or friends for help.

Changes To My Family

The days of sleeping in and having lots of time to yourself will become more limited. If you are married, your husband will also notice changes and have to adjust. Your sex life may take a little time to return to normal. Romance

will take a back seat to the sleepless nights and demands of parenthood. But don't despair. All will return to normal in 3 to 6 months.

You may also have other children at home who need your time and attention. To keep them from feeling left out, you will need to make special time for them, too.

Don't neglect yourself during this time. You may not have much time for yourself at first, but you will as you become more comfortable with your new baby. Then you will be able to take some time away and attend to your own needs.

Summary

Now, a new life begins for you and your new family. You need to spend your energy not only caring for your new baby but also healing and taking good care of yourself. Your baby will develop in the most wonderful ways when you are content and confident in yourself and motherhood. Enjoy the journey!

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