

Postpartum care: What to expect after a C-Section

When you go home

It takes about four to six weeks for a C-section incision to heal. Fatigue and discomfort are common. While you're recovering:

✓ **Take it easy.** Give yourself time to rest. Keep everything that you and your baby might need within reach. For the first two weeks, don't lift anything heavier than your baby.

✓ **Support your abdomen.** Use good posture when you stand and walk. Hold your abdomen near the incision during sudden movements, such as coughing, sneezing or laughing. Use pillows or rolled up towels for extra support while breast-feeding.

✓ **Drink plenty of fluids.** Drinking lots of fluids can help replace those lost during delivery and breast-feeding, as well as prevent constipation.

✓ **Take medication as needed.** Your doctor may recommend acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) to relieve pain. If you're constipated or bowel movements are painful, your doctor may recommend an over-the-counter stool softener or a mild laxative.

Vaginal discharge

You'll have a vaginal discharge (lochia) for up to six weeks after delivery. Expect a bright red, heavy flow of blood for the first few days. If you've been sitting or lying down, you may notice a small gush when you get up. The discharge will gradually taper off, changing from pink or brown to yellow or white. To reduce the risk of infection, use sanitary napkins rather than tampons. Don't be alarmed if you occasionally pass blood clots.

Contact your health care provider if:

- You soak a sanitary pad within an hour while lying down
- The discharge has a foul odor
- You pass clots larger than a golf ball
- You have a fever of 100.4 F (38 C) or higher
- Severe pain in your abdomen; redness, swelling, or discharge at incision site
- Red or painful areas in your legs

Sore breasts and leaking milk

Several days after delivery, your breasts may become heavy, swollen and tender. This is known as engorgement. To ease the discomfort, nurse your baby or use a breast pump to express milk. You may also want to apply cold washcloths or ice packs to your breasts, or take a warm bath or shower. Over-the-counter pain relievers may help, too. Leaky breasts are another common problem for new moms. You can't do anything to stop the leaking, but nursing pads worn inside your bra can help keep your shirt dry. Avoid pads that are lined or backed with plastic, which can irritate your nipples. Change pads after each feeding and whenever they get wet.

If you're not breast-feeding your baby, wear a firm, supportive bra. Compressing your breasts will help stop milk production. In the meantime, don't pump your breasts or express the milk. This only tells your breasts to produce more milk.

Hair loss and skin changes

During pregnancy, elevated hormone levels put normal hair loss on hold. The result is often an extra-lush head of hair — but now it's payback time. After delivery, your body sheds the excess hair all at once. Within six months, your hair will most likely be back to normal. In the meantime, shampoo only when necessary, and find a hairstyle that's easy to maintain. Avoid hair dryers, curling irons and harsh chemicals.

Stretch marks won't disappear after delivery, but eventually they'll fade from reddish purple to silver or white. Any skin that darkened during pregnancy — such as the line down your abdomen (linea nigra) — may slowly fade as well.

Mood changes

Childbirth triggers a jumble of powerful emotions. Mood swings, irritability, sadness and anxiety are common. Many new moms experience a mild depression, sometimes called the baby blues. The baby blues typically subside within a week or two. In the meantime, take good care of yourself. Try to get as much sleep as possible. If your depression deepens or you feel hopeless and sad most of the time, contact your health care provider. Prompt treatment is important.

Weight loss

After you give birth, you'll probably feel flabby and out of shape. You may even look like you're still pregnant. Don't worry. This is perfectly normal. Most women lose about 10 pounds during birth, including the weight of the baby, placenta and amniotic fluid. During the first week after delivery, you'll lose additional weight from leftover fluids. After that, a healthy diet and regular exercise can help you gradually return to your pre-pregnancy weight.

The postpartum checkup

About six weeks after delivery, your health care provider will check your vagina, cervix and uterus to make sure you're healing well. He or she may do a breast exam and check your weight and blood pressure, too. This is a great time to talk about resuming sexual activities and birth control. Share any concerns you may have about your physical or emotional health. Chances are, what you're feeling is entirely normal.