

# Self-Care After Delivery

## Follow Your Health Care Provider's Instructions

These guidelines are general. You may have instructions from your healthcare team based on your medical history and delivery. Always follow your healthcare team's instructions and contact your provider's office with any questions.

See the back page for urgent signs that may require emergency care.



## The Basics

After delivery, it's important to allow your body time to heal. Rest and take things slow during the first few weeks. Follow the activity restrictions given by your healthcare provider. Ask for and accept help from your support people. Drink plenty of water and eat a healthy diet.

## Care and Recovery

### Care After a Vaginal Delivery

The perineum is the skin between your vagina and anus. This area stretches during a vaginal delivery, and you may have had a tear or surgical cut. If you had stitches, they should dissolve on their own within a few weeks. To manage discomfort during healing:

- Use a covered ice pack (helpful for up to 72 hours after birth)
- Apply witch-hazel pads
- Use a sitz bath to flush your perineum
- Fill a squeeze bottle with warm water and squirt your perineum during and after urination

### Care After a Cesarean Delivery

Full recovery from a cesarean delivery usually takes about six weeks. Walking soon after delivery can prevent blood clots in your legs and decrease gas pain. Take the medication you've been prescribed and follow up with your healthcare provider as directed (usually one week after discharge). Follow the instructions provided to care for your incision.

### Activity Restrictions

Slowly increase your activity each day, depending on how you feel. Don't lift anything over 10 pounds, and avoid pulling or pushing. Doing light housework is okay, as long as you don't get too tired. You may walk slowly up and down stairs if you feel like it. If your vaginal bleeding increases with activity, you need to rest more.

Avoid sitting, standing, or lying down for long periods without moving your legs and feet. If your legs feel swollen or heavy, take a break and sit or lie down with your feet up.

You may drive if you are not taking narcotics and you can move your foot from the accelerator to the brake rapidly and firmly. This may take up to two weeks.

### Showering and Bathing

You may shower as desired. Do not take a bath until your health care provider says it's okay (usually after 6 weeks).

### Exercise

Exercise strengthens and tones muscles, relieves stress, improves sleep and may boost your mood. If you had a normal pregnancy and uncomplicated vaginal delivery, you may begin exercising soon after delivery. If you had any complications or a cesarean birth, ask your healthcare provider about when to begin exercising.

## Normal Changes in the Body

### General Pain Management

It's normal to feel sore after delivery. You can use ice, heat and rest to help you feel better. Remember to follow your healthcare team's instructions about taking pain medication after leaving the hospital.

### Lochia (Vaginal bleeding and discharge)

Lochia (lo-kee-a) is the bleeding and discharge you have after a vaginal or cesarean delivery. Lochia can last three to six weeks. Bleeding may be heavy for three to four days, and may increase after lying down or breastfeeding. Passing small to medium clots (up to the size of a ping-pong ball) can be normal, but should only happen once in a while.

As days pass, the color and flow of lochia should get lighter, and you should have fewer, smaller clots. By ten days after delivery, your discharge will become yellow or white, and you should no longer pass clots. If your lochia was getting lighter, then turns bright red again, this may be a sign that you are being too active and need to allow yourself to rest and heal.

Use pads (not tampons or menstrual cups) for six weeks after delivery to lower the risk of infection.

### Involution

Involution is the process of your uterus shrinking after delivery. It takes about six weeks for your uterus to return to its pre-pregnancy size. You could feel cramps or contractions as your uterus shrinks, and these may feel stronger during breastfeeding. You can use heat, deep breathing techniques, or pain medication recommended by your healthcare team to manage discomfort.

### Constipation

Constipation is when you have fewer bowel movements than normal (usually less than three in a week) and your stool is hard and dry. To prevent or manage constipation, drink lots of water, eat foods rich in fiber, take short walks, and use an over-the-counter stool softener.

### Hemorrhoids

Hemorrhoids are swollen veins in and around your anus. Hemorrhoids are common after delivery and can be painful. Constipation may cause hemorrhoids. To relieve pain, use witch hazel pads or hemorrhoid cream.

### Menstrual Cycle

Your menstrual cycle could restart within a few weeks after delivery, or it could be six months or longer before it resumes.

Your first period after delivery may be different from how it was before pregnancy. It could be shorter or longer, heavier or lighter. With time, it will probably return to normal.

If your period happens within six weeks of delivery, use pads (not tampons or menstrual cups) to lower the risk of infection.



## Resuming Sex

Avoid intercourse to let your body to heal and decrease the risk of infection. This usually takes about six weeks. Remember, you will ovulate before you have a menstrual period, so you could get pregnant before your period returns. Talk to your health care provider about when you can resume intercourse and your choices around family planning and birth control.

## Your Emotions After Delivery

This is an emotional time. You may be feeling all kinds of ways. You might have expected to feel happy, and sometimes you do, but you may also feel sad, overwhelmed and exhausted.

### Baby Blues

About eight of ten people who give birth get the “baby blues”. You could have mood swings, feel weepy, or just feel out of sorts. Rest when you can, and talk about your feelings with your support people. With rest and support, the baby blues usually go away on their own in a few days or weeks.

### Perinatal Mood & Anxiety Disorder

(sometimes called PMAD)

If your mood changes last longer than three to four weeks after delivery or get in the way of your daily activities, you could have a perinatal mood or anxiety disorder. If you’ve experienced a mental health condition in the past, you have a higher risk of experiencing a perinatal mood and anxiety disorder.



For more information about your recovery after delivery, visit [acog.org](https://www.acog.org) “For Patients”

**Signs of postpartum depression** are different for everyone, but may include feeling angry; feeling guilty; not being interested in other people; and having a hard time eating, sleeping, or making decisions.

**Signs of postpartum anxiety** may include worrying all the time; feeling afraid or uneasy; feeling something bad is going to happen; feeling restless; having racing thoughts; feeling a racing heart, and dizziness or stomach sickness.

**Signs of postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder** include having repetitive pictures and thoughts that are scary or strange, but that you don’t intend to act on. These images or thoughts can be very upsetting, and parents may take actions to stay away from what they fear.

If you think you may have a PMAD, know that you are not alone, you are not to blame, and with help, you will be well. Contact the healthcare provider who cared for you during pregnancy. You can also call Postpartum Support International’s Hotline at **1-800-944-4773**.



## Call 911 or Go to the Emergency Room



Chest pain



Coughing or  
gasping for air



Seizures



Thoughts of hurting  
yourself or others



Very bad lower belly pain  
that doesn't go away

## Call Your Health Care Provider Immediately



Bad headache that won't go away after taking  
medicine or that gets worse as time passes



Very bad stomach sickness and throwing up  
(not like morning sickness)



Heavy vaginal bleeding that soaks through  
two pads per hour for an hour or two



Fever of 100.4°F  
or higher



Trouble  
breathing



Extreme swelling in  
your hands or face



Dizziness  
or fainting



Changes in  
your vision



Painful, red,  
swollen leg

### What to say your healthcare provider, 911, or the emergency room staff:

1. I gave birth on

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2. I am having these symptoms/problems

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3. This has been going on since

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4. Can you tell me what might be  
happening? What do I need to do?



## Call Your Healthcare Provider

You don't need to call 911 or go to the emergency room, but these things can become serious if not treated, so contact your healthcare provider.

### Bowel and Bladder

- Constipation that lasts more than a few days
- Pain or burning with urination

### Breasts

- Firm, painful red area on your breast
- Feeling tired and achy, like you have the flu

### Cesarean Incision

- Signs of infection around your incision - including bleeding, oozing fluid, separation at the edges of your incision or more swelling or redness than you had the day before

### Perineum (skin between your vagina and anus)

- Pain that is getting worse
- Vaginal discharge that has a bad smell

### Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders

- Constant crying or worrying
- Problems with sleeping, eating or making choices
- Questioning if you can take care of yourself or others
- Intrusive thoughts
- Strong feelings of sadness or worry that get in the way of your daily life