Postnatal Care – The Early Days

Your new baby has finally entered the world. So now what?
- If you had a normal or assisted delivery you will most likely remain in hospital for two to three days.
- If you have had a caesarean section you will most likely remain in hospital for four to five days.

Look after yourself.

Postnatal health for new mothers.

Welcome to motherhood!

You will find it both rewarding and demanding caring for your new baby, and it’s all too easy in the excitement to forget about your own health. With everything focusing on the birth, you may not have given much thought to what happens to you afterwards.

Body Changes

Bleeding:
- Lochia describes the discharge from the womb as its lining is shed following birth. For the first 2-4 days after the birth, the loss will be red and heavy, similar to a period. During the first week, the loss will diminish, becoming more brown or pink in colour. After about 2-3 weeks, the loss becomes creamy brown/clear and eventually stops.
- If you notice that the loss has an offensive smell, becomes heavier or becomes bright red after the first 4-5 days, tell your midwife or public health nurse so that they can make sure you don’t have an infection.
- Your next period may start again within the first six weeks, although if you are fully breast-feeding this may be delayed.

After pains:
- You may feel mild contractions in the first few days after delivery as the uterus shrinks back to its pre-pregnancy size. Painkillers such as paracetamol, (but take care not to exceed the stated dose), may relieve the discomfort.
**Perineal Pain:**
- If you have torn the perineum (the area around the vaginal opening) or have had an episiotomy and stitches, you are bound to feel sore and uncomfortable for the first few days. Make sure that you take medication to relieve the soreness.
- If you have had stitches, these take about two weeks to dissolve. Clean the area after going to the toilet. Avoid constipation and drink plenty of fluids in order to keep your urine dilute and reduce the stinging.
- Do not use soap, oils or perfumed products in the bath, keep the area clean and dry, and rest as much as possible until the stitches feel more comfortable.

**Care after a caesarean:-**
- After a Caesarean you may find it takes a little longer to recover your physical health and strength. This is entirely normal.
- For the first few days, the midwife will examine your wound to ensure that it is healing. Stitches are usually removed on about the fifth day.
- The main thing to remember is not to over stretch, lift heavy objects, hoover or drive in the first four to six weeks.

**Breasts:**
- During the first few days following the birth, your breasts will change as they prepare for feeding. This happens whether or not you intend to breast feed your baby.
- It is important to wear a well fitting and supportive bra during this time. You may also feel more comfortable wearing it at night. If you are breast-feeding, you may wish to wear breast pads. These disposable pads fit neatly into your bra and absorb excess milk.
- Ask your midwife for help with breast-feeding as positioning the baby correctly on the breast is the key to successful breast feeding.

**Fatigue:**
- It is normal to feel very tired after having a baby. Ensure that you rest when baby sleeps and don’t try to do too much in the early days. Ask for help from family and friends. You have enough to do looking after your baby without having to look after guests.

**Swelling:**
- Your feet and hands might swell after your baby is born. This swelling is due to excess fluid present in the body following delivery and usually goes away within a few days. However, it can be very uncomfortable especially in hot weather.
- Make sure that you have as much rest as possible and elevate your feet while sitting. This helps relieve the pressure of the fluid in the legs. Remove any tight fitting rings if your fingers swell.

**Backache:**
- During pregnancy your balance and posture are affected by the size of your growing uterus. In addition, the hormones of pregnancy soften the muscles and ligaments that support your back.
• Try not to lift heavy objects for the first few weeks after birth. When you do lift, bend at the knees. Sit well supported and ensure that you are comfortable when feeding your baby.

• After the first six weeks you will find your muscle tone improves especially if combined with postnatal exercise. If you still suffer backache after six weeks consult your doctor.

Haemorrhoids, varicose veins & constipation:

• They are all made worse in pregnancy. In the postnatal period, the levels of progesterone fall and these problems usually diminish.

• Eating a well balanced diet with adequate fibre and fluid will help lessen the discomfort of haemorrhoids and reduce the risk of constipation. Your midwife or pharmacist can advise you about creams that reduce the pain of ‘piles’. Make sure you wash thoroughly after each bowel movement to prevent inflammation and soreness. If the problem persists tell your Doctor at your six-week postnatal examination.

• If you suffer from varicose veins make sure you have plenty of rest with your legs elevated. If you have been wearing support tights in pregnancy you should continue wearing them in the postnatal period, put them on before you get out of bed in the morning. Leg exercises encourage blood flow through the legs.

Skin and Hair changes:

• During pregnancy some women report that their hair has never been in such good condition, while others say the opposite!

• In the postnatal period some women notice hair loss. This is usually very mild, use hair products, which are best suited to your hair type and ask your hairdresser’s advise before having a colour or a perm.

• If you developed stretch marks on your abdomen and thighs and/or a dark line down the centre of your abdomen during pregnancy the will fade once the baby is born. Stretch marks never completely disappear - however, they do fade to a pale, silvery colour and thereafter difficult to see.

Stress Incontinence:

• Following pregnancy and childbirth, many women experience stress incontinence, which means that the pass urine by accident if they laugh, cough, or if the bladder becomes very full. To help prevent or to improve this situation, exercises to strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor are of utmost importance- your midwife will advise you on these.

• Drink fluids regularly and empty your bladder frequently. Tell your doctor, midwife or public health nurse if the problem persists.
**Relationships**

**You and your partner:**
- A new baby not only changes your life but that of your partner too.
  - Sometimes it’s easy to forget that in the early days men experience the emotional stresses of parenthood as strongly as mothers do.
- Make sure that you talk to your partner. Tell him how you feel and ask him how he feels. You both may find caring for your baby hard going initially, so try to support each other.
- Also, try to have time together without the baby. Ask a friend or relative to baby sit—even if it is only for a short while.

**Sex:**
- There are no rules about when you start having sex, even if you have had stitches. Make love when you feel comfortable but ensure you use contraception if you do not want another baby straight away.
- If you are tired and sore and don’t want to rush things, find other ways of being close and loving.
- There is a risk of pregnancy even if you are breast-feeding—so use contraception.
- For advice on contraception speak to your midwife or doctor.

**You and your body:**
- Motherhood means different things to different people. The first few times we all frequently get things ‘wrong’! Don’t worry what everyone seems to say or do. You will soon discover which routines and advice best suit you and your baby’s needs, so give yourself time and space.

**Healthy living**

**Diet:**
- Your diet following the birth of your baby should be nourishing and well balanced. Try to eat adequate protein as this is needed for body repair and has an important role in the production of breast milk.
- Your diet should also have adequate amount of iron to help counteract anaemia. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables to help relieve constipation and provide a healthy intake of vitamins and minerals.
- If you are breast-feeding, allow your hunger and thirst to regulate your food and fluid intake. Try to increase your daily intake of oily fish such
as mackerel or salmon as they contain long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids thought to be important for infant brain development.

• Slimming diets should be avoided while breast-feeding.

**Exercise:**

• As soon as possible after birth you should start your pelvic floor exercises. Exercise improves muscle tone, promotes healing and aids the drainage of lochia.
• Increase your exercising each day - gentle exercise in the first six weeks. If you experience any pain while exercising stop and reduce the amount of exercising.
• Walking is an ideal form of exercise for mum and baby.

**Moods and feelings:**

• Giving birth is an emotional experience for any woman and the demands of motherhood combined with the dramatic life changes have a profound effect on how you feel.
• Don’t expect to feel like an experienced confident and happy mother straight away. Every mother is different, and many find the transition to motherhood difficult especially when sleep is at a premium.
• Try to get adequate rest and sleep when the baby sleeps. It is quite normal to feel tearful in the first few days. However, if you continue to feel tired, depressed or low, talk to your midwife or public health nurse.

Enjoy your baby!

*After giving birth, your health is as important as that of your baby. Take time to adjust to the challenge of motherhood. Always ask for help even if the problem seems small. You and your baby need time to get to know each other and that's best done when you are both in the best possible health!!*

**Remember**

• *Your two and six week postnatal check up, at either your GP's surgery for you and baby or with your obstetrician.*
• It is essential that you have a postnatal cervical smear if you have not had one within the last 3 years and the ideal time for this is when your baby is four to six months - Don’t forget!

THE BABY BLUES AND POSTNATAL DEPRESSION

One in two women who have just given birth experience the baby blues. This leaflet explains why some women feel emotional after a birth and it offers information and advice about the blues and postnatal depression.

The Baby Blues

After the birth about half the mothers suffer a period of mild depression called the blues. This may last for a few hours or at most for a few days and then it disappears.

Symptoms of the Blues

• Many mothers feel very emotional and upset when they have the blues and they cry for no particular reason.
• They may find that it is impossible to cheer up.
• Some mothers feel very anxious and tense.
• Minor problems may cause mothers with the blues to worry a great deal.
• Some mothers have pains for which there is no medical cause or they may feel unwell but without any particular symptoms.
• Most mothers who have the blues feel very tired and lethargic most of the time. Frequently they have trouble sleeping.

Possible causes

• The blues may have several causes some biological some emotional. When a baby is born there are very sudden changes in the mother’s hormone levels. Some, required during pregnancy, drop rapidly, while others like those, which start the production of milk rise. These rapid changes may act to trigger the blues.
• Many mothers are unprepared for extreme weariness, which often follows a birth. The weariness is usually due to a combination of factors. In many cases the mother will have been anticipating the birth with some apprehension. This, as well as the physical exertion of the birth itself, can make mothers feel exhausted.
• Rest and quiet are most important after a birth. Few mothers get either, as they are busy responding to the needs of the baby, or, when they might be able to rest, they are disturbed by hospital or home routines or by visitors who may stay too long.
• Sometimes the baby may have a slight health problem such as jaundice or feeding difficulties in the early days. These problems are very common with new babies, but they cause mothers great anxiety. The problems do settle down as the baby gets older and mothers should try to talk to medical staff and allow themselves to be reassured that the baby will thrive.
What can be done to help a Blues sufferer?

- Mothers who have the blues should be allowed to cry if they want to and allowed to express their fluctuating emotions.
- If they feel miserable they should not be told to pull themselves together.
- It can be a great help to the mother if someone listens to her and reassures her that her worries and misery will not last and that she will soon feel happier.
- A mother who has the blues must have as much rest as possible.
- It may also help the mother if she is told that the blues are very common and that they pass quickly.
- Affected mothers are often oversensitive about what is said to them by relatives and medical staff. So tact and empathy from the staff can be beneficial at this time.

Length of the Blues

In most cases only a few days and the feelings fade. If the blues do continue and seem to be getting worse see your Doctor.

Postnatal Depression

- Postnatal Depression has many symptoms.
- Most mothers who have the illness find that they are less able to cope with the demands of the baby and the home.
- Some mothers feel very despondent. They may feel very sad and cry frequently.
- Some feel anxious and fearful; they worry about their own health and that of the baby. They may suffer from panic attacks and feel tense and irritable all of the time.
- Most Depressed mothers feel tired and lack energy, often they feel unable to concentrate and find even simple tasks are confusing and demand too much energy.
- Some mothers experience pains for which there is no cause (other than tension and anxiety), many suffer difficulty in sleeping and poor appetite.
- Many depressed mothers lose interest in sex.
- A depressed mother may suffer from any or all of these symptoms mentioned. Most mothers who have this illness feel guilty that they are not ‘coping’ as well as they feel they should be.

What can be done if you have postnatal depression?
• If your depression lasts longer than a few days you should discuss your feelings with your Doctor. If possible take your partner or a friend or relative with you. Before you see the Doctor write a list of all the symptoms that you are suffering from.
• You should not go on suffering depression in the hope that it will go away. Postnatal depression is a real illness and it can be treated successfully with antidepressant drugs. These drugs are not addictive. They make the unpleasant symptoms fade until they go completely.

Who else can help?

• After you have seen the doctor, you may find it helpful to talk to an understanding and sympathetic member of your family or a friend. If your friend understands that you will recover completely and be your ‘old self’. Again when you are better, then he or she can be a real source of comfort and reassurance to you during the time of your illness.
• Your midwife and public health nurse can also give you advice, reassurance and support.
• It is important to remember that all mothers recover from postnatal depression. As the recovery proceeds, the bad days get fewer and less upsetting and the good days become more numerous. Gradually the bad days disappear completely.
• Some mothers find it helpful to talk to a mother who has had postnatal depression and recovered, you can always speak to a counsellor about your depression.

Self help

• It can help to rest as much as possible if you are suffering from depression. Although it can be difficult to rest when you have a demanding baby and perhaps other children to care for. You will find that you feel worse if you are over tired.
• Ask your partner or friend to care for the baby whilst you have a proper rest, preferably in the middle of the day. Try to lie on your bed even if you don’t sleep. A rest in the day often improves sleeping at night for those with sleeping difficulties.
• Try to eat a small meal or have a hot sweet drink at regular intervals. Many depressed mothers forget to eat and this can make the depression feel worse.

Further Information Available From -

| Postnatal Depression Ireland |
| 021 4923162 |
| Or |
| www.pnd.ie |