Physical Changes After Birth

The first 6 weeks following the birth of your baby is called the postpartum period. These weeks are important as your body returns to normal after labor and birth. At the same time, you are welcoming a new life into your world. Knowing what to expect and relying on the continuing support of your healthcare team will help you relax in the postpartum experience with as much confidence and comfort as possible.

Your body gradually returns to its pre-pregnancy state during these 4 to 6 weeks. The amount of time needed for this process varies, depending on the type of birth you had and other medical conditions.

The Uterus

The normal changes of the pregnant uterus to hold a developing baby are not reversed overnight. During pregnancy the uterus increases to about 11 times its non-pregnant weight. Right after birth it weighs more than 2 pounds and measures about the size of a grapefruit. It can be felt just below the belly button. In about 6 weeks, the uterus will return to its normal weight of only 2 ounces.

Be sure to tell your nurse or healthcare provider if you:

- Soak more than 1 pad / hour for 2 to 3 hours.
- Pass large clots or bright red bleeding after day 4.
- Notice your lochia has a bad smell.
- Have a fever over 100.4°F.
- Have severe pain in your lower abdomen.

Lochia (Vaginal Discharge)

You will have vaginal discharge while the area where the placenta was attached heals and the lining of the uterus is shed. This discharge, called lochia, is usually described as having a “fleshy, musty or earthy” smell. The smell should not be bad. You may notice your lochia is heavier when you stand up. This heavier flow is from the blood that collects in your vagina while you are sitting or lying down. Too much activity can also cause a heavier blood flow. This is your sign to slow down or rest. You may have less lochia if you had a cesarean birth. Wear pads until your lochia stops, not tampons. Tampons increase the chance for infection in your uterus.

First 2 to 3 days
- Bright to dark red.
- Heavy to medium flow.
- May have small clots.

About days 4 to 10
- Pink or brown-tinged.
- Medium to light flow.
- Very few or no clots.

About days 10 to 21
- Yellowish-white color.
- Very light flow.
- No clots, bright red color, or bad smell.

Bowel Elimination

Hormones, medications, dehydration, perineal pain and decreased physical activity may make bowel function sluggish after birth. The first bowel movement usually happens within 2 to 3 days. It may be a little uncomfortable, and you may be a little afraid.

When it is time:
- Try to relax.
- Put your feet on a stool and rest your elbows on your knees.
- From the front you can hold a clean sanitary pad over your perineum for support.
- Avoid straining. It can make hemorrhoids worse.

What can help:
- Don’t resist the urge.
- Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water a day.
- Eat fiber rich foods.
- Keep moving – walk or do yoga stretches.
- Take stool softeners.

Hemorrhoids

A hemorrhoid is a dilated blood vessel under the skin. They can be inside the rectum or outside on the anus. Hemorrhoids are not usually serious but can be painful.

Symptoms:
- Pain or discomfort.
- Itching.
- Irritation.
- Small amount of bleeding.
- Swelling around the anus.

What can help:
- Avoid straining during bowel movements.
- Avoid sitting or standing for long periods of time.
- Try cold compresses and/or warm baths.
- Use pre-moistened wipes instead of toilet paper.
- Use topical creams, suppositories and pain medication as directed by your healthcare provider.