Caring for Yourself

postpartum
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The information in this booklet is for general reference purposes only and cannot be relied upon as a substitute for medical care. You should have regular postpartum check-ups as well as consult with your healthcare provider about any special health questions or concerns. Every woman is unique and may require a special treatment program.

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CHANGES AFTER BIRTH

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS
The first weeks are important ones as your body returns to normal after labor and birth. Knowing what to expect and relying on continuing support of your healthcare team will help you through the postpartum experience with as much comfort as possible.

After you leave the hospital, please do not hesitate to call your healthcare provider if you have questions or problems. Be aware of your own physical and emotional well-being.

NORMAL CHANGES
In the 4 to 6 weeks following birth, the changes of pregnancy are gradually reversed as the body begins to return to its normal state. The amount of time required for this process varies, depending on the type of birth you had and other associated medical conditions. The first 6 weeks is called the postpartum period.

THE UTERUS
The normal changes of the uterus are not reversed overnight. During pregnancy, the uterus increases approximately 11 times its size, weighing more than 2 pounds immediately after birth and is about the size of a grapefruit. It can be felt just below the umbilicus. In about 6 weeks, the uterus will return to its normal weight, a mere 2 ounces.
AFTERBIRTH PAIN

As the uterus shrinks, its muscle fibers contract, causing slight discomfort known as afterbirth pains. These contractions are much less painful than labor contractions because there is no associated pain from the cervical dilation or a stretching birth canal. Afterbirth pains are most noticeable the first 3 to 4 days postpartum, particularly for women who have had previous deliveries. However, they help shrink the uterus to its normal state and reduce blood loss.

BIRTH CANAL

The vagina, which has stretched, gradually returns to its previous condition by the end of the third week. The supporting structures and muscles of the pelvic floor may not completely return to normal for 6 to 7 weeks. Episiotomies usually require 4 or more weeks to heal. It is important to resume Kegel exercises in the first early days. These pelvic floor exercises may help speed healing and help muscles return to normal.

LOCHIA (VAGINAL DISCHARGE)

The drainage from the vagina is called lochia. During the immediate few days after birth, the discharge is like a menstrual flow. In 3 to 4 days, the discharge becomes more watery and pale. By the second week, lochia is thicker and more yellow in color. Finally, after 4 weeks, the discharge decreases to a minimum as the uterine lining heals.

The odor of lochia is usually described as “fleshy, musty or earthy.” The odor should not be bad or offensive. You may experience occasional cramping, and with that, the passing of a clot and brief bleeding. This is normal. Do not be alarmed. Lochia is often heavier when you stand or get out of bed. During rest, gravity lets the blood pool in the vagina. However, it is important to notify your healthcare provider if you experience heavy, profuse and persistent bleeding (more than 1 pad per hour or passing a clot greater than the size of a fifty-cent piece), or if there is a foul odor to the discharge. These may be signs of problems within the uterine cavity.

SINCE YOU MAY HAVE LOCHIA FOR UP TO 4 WEEKS, THE PERINEUM MUST BE KEPT CLEAN AND DRY.

- Your sanitary pads should be changed frequently.
- Take a sitz bath to help with healing and discomfort. A sitz bath involves sitting in shallow water, only deep enough to cover the hips and buttocks.
- If urinating is uncomfortable, squirt warm water over the perineum during urination. This may ease the discomfort. When finished urinating, gently pat the perineum dry.
- Also, do not use tampons postpartum. Tampons may cause an infection.
**BREASTS**

Your breasts may become heavy and swollen 3 to 4 days postpartum. This may cause pain. For comfort, try wearing a tight sports bra. Keep warm shower water away from the breasts. Cold compresses can reduce swelling and provide comfort. Cabbage treatments may also be helpful. Take a fresh head of green cabbage and remove the large outer leaves. Rinse the leaves and pat dry. Place in the refrigerator until the leaves become cold and crisp. Place the open leaf directly on the breasts. Use as many leaves as you need to cover the breasts. Wear the cabbage leaves inside an old bra until they become warm and limp. Remove and throw away. This treatment can be repeated throughout the day as needed. Anti-inflammatory medications may be taken as prescribed. Remember to resume breast self-exams after 4 to 6 weeks. Perform the exam the same time each month.

**EXERCISE**

Exercising postpartum should be a gradual process. Before you do anything, you should talk to your healthcare provider about simple exercises you can do the first couple of weeks. Kegel exercises are a great place to start, since they involve small contractions of the muscles at the vaginal wall. They can help strengthen weak pelvic muscles that could cause bladder control problems. Exercising your pelvic floor muscles for just 5 minutes, 3 times a day can make a big difference.

**MENSTRUAL CYCLE**

Most women will experience their first period within 7 to 9 weeks postpartum. Egg production may return before the first menstrual period which could result in pregnancy.

**BLADDER**

Sometimes, the bladder will not empty at all following birth and a urinary catheter is required. It is important for you to try to empty your bladder every 3 to 4 hours while hospitalized. Because your body will be getting rid of extra fluid that caused hand and leg swelling late in pregnancy, you will notice that you will eliminate large amounts of urine for the first few days.
SKIN CHANGES

Many skin changes that developed during pregnancy are caused by an increase of hormones. The blotchy appearance of the face and “dark line” of the lower abdomen disappear gradually over several months.

You may have developed brownish or yellowish patches called chloasma. This can appear anywhere on the face, but are seen most commonly on the forehead, upper cheeks, nose and chin. Estrogen and progesterone stimulate the melanin cells in the skin to produce more pigment, yet because these cells do not produce extra pigment uniformly, facial skin may acquire a blotchy appearance. Brunettes and darker-skinned women may notice darkened circles, resembling eye shadow, around their eyes. Chloasma cannot be prevented, but you can minimize the intensity of these blotchy, darkened areas by limiting your skins exposure to the sun.

STRETCH MARKS

Stretch marks are small, depressed streaks in the skin that appear most often on the abdomen. Some women also get them on their buttocks, thighs, hips and breasts. They are caused by changes in the elastic supportive tissue that lies just beneath the skin. They start out pink, reddish brown, purple or dark brown, depending on your skin color. They gradually fade to a silvery color, although they never totally disappear.

BOWELS

Hormones, medications, dehydration, perineal pain and decreased physical activity may make bowel function sluggish. The first bowel movement usually occurs within 2 to 3 days. Temporary constipation is not harmful, although it can cause a feeling of fullness and “gas.” If needed, a laxative or stool softener may provide relief from constipation and hemorrhoids that may develop during and after labor.

BOWEL ELIMINATION

Progressive exercise, dietary fiber and extra water and fluid can prevent constipation. Walking is perhaps the best exercise. Increase your distance as your strength and endurance improve. Drinking 6 to 8 glasses of water each day helps to maintain normal bowel function. Fiber acts as a natural laxative and dietary fiber can be found in fruits and vegetables (especially unpeeled) and in whole-grain bread, cereal and pasta. If you are having a problem, talk to your healthcare professional.
WEIGHT LOSS
Much of the weight remaining after birth is from excess fluid. Weight loss should occur as your body’s fluid levels return to normal. If you need to lose more weight, a healthy exercise and nutritious eating program will help.

MUSCLES AND JOINTS
In the first 1 to 2 days postpartum, you will feel muscle aches and fatigue, particularly in your shoulders, neck and arms. This is a result of the physical exertion during labor. Joint stiffness of the hands is also common, a result of intravenous fluids given during labor and a natural redistribution of fluid from leg swelling late in pregnancy.

Many women, expecting the abdominal wall muscles to return to pre-pregnancy condition, are discouraged to find their muscles weak, soft and flabby. The abdominal muscles may actually separate with a bulge between them. Ask your healthcare provider about an exercise program that can help and when you can start.

VARICOSE VEINS
If you have developed varicose veins during pregnancy, leg elevation and use of elastic support hose when walking or standing are recommended for the first 6 weeks postpartum. Varicose vein surgery is not indicated during the first 6 months of recovery for women with residual, bothersome veins.

HEMORRHOIDS
Hemorrhoids are best treated by cold compresses, topical ointments and pain medications if your healthcare provider has prescribed them. A stool softener or laxative may be beneficial at times. Severe pain from hemorrhoids may cause constipation. Be sure to talk with your healthcare provider if this is a concern for you.

If your hemorrhoids or perineum are causing you some discomfort when sitting, you can try an inflatable “doughnut” cushion. This may help reduce the pull on your episiotomy or hemorrhoids.

EYE HEMORRHAGES
Bleeding beneath the “white” of the eye can occur due to the vigorous bearing down required during labor. This clears by itself without special treatment in a few weeks.
PERINATAL MOOD AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

You may encounter impatience, irritability or crying. These feelings are generally normal. However, according to Postpartum Support International, as many as 1 in 8 women may experience emotional symptoms known as perinatal mood and anxiety disorders. Postpartum depression may start as early as the second or third day after birth or take several weeks or months to develop. Many of the symptoms of "the blues" are present, but they are more intense.

Although healthcare providers are not sure what causes such extreme reactions, most believe perinatal mood and anxiety disorders stem from the physical and emotional adjustment of what you have gone through along with the changes in hormone levels that occur postpartum. Please know that any woman can get postpartum depression in the months after childbirth, miscarriage or stillbirth. It is important to realize that these symptoms are not signs of weakness or inadequacy.

At the onset of these changes, you need to contact your healthcare provider immediately. Treatment may include medication, counseling or a combination of both, and in some cases, hospitalization. With proper treatment, most women recover fully. Above all, remember perinatal mood and anxiety disorders are real conditions and help is available.

PLEASE CONTACT YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE ANY OF THESE SIGNS OR SYMPTOMS:

• Depressed mood-tearfulness, hopelessness, and feeling empty inside, possibly with severe anxiety.
• A significant loss of pleasure in either all or almost all of your daily activities.
• Little or no concern about your own appearance.
• Appetite and weight change-usually a drop in your appetite and weight, but sometimes the opposite.
• Sleep problems-usually insomnia.
• Noticeable changes in how you walk and talk-usually restlessness, but sometimes sluggishness.
• Extreme fatigue or loss of energy.
• Feeling worthless or having inappropriate guilt.
• Difficulty concentrating and making decisions.
• Thinking a lot about death or suicide.

THINGS YOU SHOULD SHARE WITH YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER:

• You have a personal or family history of depression or postpartum depression.
• You have poor support from your partner, friends or family.
• You have a lot of other stress in your life.
SELF-CARE TIPS

GETTING AROUND ON YOUR OWN

It is best to get up and move around postpartum, but exactly when you start depends on the particular type of anesthesia that was used for your labor and birth. Moving around minimizes the risk of blood clots in veins of your pelvis and lower extremities. It also helps with better bladder and bowel function.

HYGIENE AND EPISIOTOMY

Change sanitary pads frequently to absorb the discharge and avoid infection. The perineum should be rinsed and cleaned with lukewarm water 2 to 3 times daily and after urination and bowel movements. Use a hand-held shower, a squeeze bottle or sitz bath to cleanse your bottom or stitches from an episiotomy if one was performed.

The occasional use of antiseptic spray or antibiotic cream may provide relief. Use moist antiseptic towelettes or toilet paper in a patting motion to dry the perineum. Washing or wiping should occur from front to back to prevent contamination of the birth canal and avoid potential infection. The episiotomy will heal quickly if kept clean and dry.

WOMEN WITH A CESAREAN BIRTH

Keep your incision clean and dry as instructed by your healthcare team. Please call if it becomes red, swollen, tender, warm to the touch or is draining.

BATHING

Showers are usually fine as soon as you can walk. Sitz or tub baths are generally safe after the second day postpartum. They are preferred by many because of discharge or if you had an episiotomy. Vaginal douching is not recommended until your 4 to 6 week check-up with your healthcare provider.

REST AND SLEEP

There are several reasons for the extreme fatigue postpartum. Women do not sleep well late in pregnancy and are further exhausted by the physical work of labor. Many visitors further compound the problem. Hospital surroundings and routines along with the physical discomfort can make it difficult to rest.
When sleep is not possible, relaxation exercises may be helpful. This relaxation is accomplished by lying quietly as you alternately tighten and relax the muscles of your neck, shoulders, arms, legs and feet.

**RESUMING SEX**

You should discuss resuming sex with your partner so that there will be few frustrations and misunderstandings. You may not be as interested in having sex as you were before pregnancy because of fatigue. You may also have concern about pain in the area of the episiotomy or cesarean incision.

You can expect vaginal dryness and diminished vaginal lubrication. A water soluble cream or jelly can solve this problem.

If you experience difficulty with sexual intercourse, always discuss it with your partner. Set aside time for each other a few times each week in order to become “reacquainted.” If the problem persists, then discuss it with your healthcare professional.

**NUTRITION**

Your diet should be balanced and contain the appropriate amount of calories and nutrients. The Choose MyPlate food program was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to assist adults in choosing foods that provide them the nutrients they require. You may lose up to 20 pounds in the postpartum period. More weight loss will be easier with moderate exercise and a smart eating program. Choose MyPlate can serve as a guide to both balance and moderation.
The Food Guide states that for a 2,000 calorie diet, you need the amounts from each food group below. To find the amounts that are right for you, go to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov.

- **Grains** – Make half your grains whole: Eat at least 3 oz. of whole-grain cereals, breads, crackers, rice, or pasta every day. 1 oz. is about 1 slice of bread, about 1 cup of breakfast cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice, cereal or pasta. Eat a total of 6 oz. every day.

- **Vegetables** – Vary your veggies: Eat more dark-green veggies like broccoli, spinach and other dark leafy greens. Eat more orange vegetables like carrots and sweet potatoes. Eat more dry beans and peas like pinto beans, kidney beans and lentils. Eat 2½ cups every day.

- **Fruits** – Focus on fruits: Eat a variety of fruit. Choose fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit. Eat 2 cups every day. Go easy on fruit juices.

- **Dairy** – Get calcium-rich foods: Go low-fat or fat-free when you choose milk, yogurt and other milk products. If you don’t or can’t consume milk, choose lactose-free products or other calcium sources such as fortified foods and beverages. Get 3 cups every day; for kids aged 2 to 8, it’s 2 cups a day.

- **Protein** – Go lean: Choose low-fat or lean meats and poultry. Bake it, broil it or grill it. Vary your protein routine – choose more fish, beans, peas, nuts and seeds. Eat 5½ oz. every day.

**FIND YOUR BALANCE BETWEEN FOOD AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

- Be sure to stay within your daily calorie needs.
- Be physically active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- About 60 minutes a day of physical activity may be needed to prevent weight gain.
- For sustaining weight loss, at least 60 to 90 minutes a day of physical activity may be required.
- Children and teenagers should be physically active for 60 minutes every day or most days.

**KNOW THE LIMITS ON FATS, SUGARS AND SALT (SODIUM)**

- Make most of your fat sources from fish, nuts and vegetable oils.
- Limit solid fats like butter, stick margarine, shortening and lard, as well as foods that contain these.
- Check the Nutrition Facts label to keep saturated fats, trans fats and sodium low.
- Choose food and beverages low in added sugars. Added sugars contribute calories with few, if any, nutrients.

Choose MyPlate

Go to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov for more information.
QUESTIONS FOR MY HEALTHCARE PROVIDER:

RESOURCES

American Congress of Obstetrics and Gynecologists – www.acog.org

Depression Awareness, Recognition, and Treatment Program
National Institute of Mental Health – 1-800-421-4211 or www.nimh.nih.gov

Postpartum Support International – 1-800-944-4PPD or www.postpartum.net

Local numbers you can call: ________________________________

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