

# Postpartum Guide

Taking care of mom  
after baby is born



## Important phone numbers

**Medical Emergency**  
911

**St. Patrick Hospital  
Family Maternity Center**  
406-329-5300

**St. Patrick Lactation Consultant**  
406-329-5340

**St. Patrick Family and  
Birth Educator**  
406-329-5348

**Western Montana Clinic**  
406-721-5600

**American Association of  
Poison Control Centers**  
800-222-1222

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## Important warning signs

Call your health care provider immediately if you develop any of these warning signs:

- Pain that gets worse and is unrelieved by medication
- Painful, very red and swollen incision or leaking of any fluids
- Bright red or heavy vaginal bleeding with or without clots that saturates a pad in less than one hour
- Foul-smelling vaginal flow
- Fever or chills with a temperature over 100.4 F
- Ongoing urinary or perineal discomfort
- Burning, frequent or bloody urination
- Cracked nipples or red, tender areas in a breast that don't respond to home treatment
- Symptoms of postpartum depression
- Crying spells or mood swings that feel out of control

## Congratulations on the birth of your baby!

The time just after a baby is born, the postpartum period, is a special one. It brings many physical and emotional changes. This guide will help answer questions about the changes in your body and about your postpartum care. It is not meant as a substitute for professional medical care. If you have questions or concerns, be sure to talk with your health care provider.

### Postpartum period defined

The time immediately after you deliver your baby until your reproductive organs return to their pre-pregnancy state is called the postpartum period. It begins as soon as your baby is born and usually lasts about six weeks.

During this time, you'll likely be on "night shift" with the baby for several days or even weeks. Many babies are more wakeful at night and want to feed frequently in the first few weeks.

It is important for you to sleep when the baby sleeps; focus only on caring for yourself and your baby. If possible, have family or friends help with housecleaning, laundry and cooking for the first couple of weeks.



## Postpartum medical care

Within a few days of going home from the hospital, make an appointment with your health care provider for a postpartum medical checkup. The timing of this visit will vary according to your health care provider's preferences and your delivery experience, but it will be sometime between two and six weeks after your baby is born.

After leaving the hospital, you are always welcome to call your health care provider.

## Postpartum blues and depression

Having a baby brings many dramatic changes – changes in your lifestyle, sleep, hormones, and views of yourself and your family. It is not surprising that mood swings and feelings of sadness, resentment and self-doubt can accompany your adjustment to motherhood.

Many mothers feel overwhelmed and very, very tired. Such feelings are normal. They usually do not last more than a few weeks. However, if your feelings are more than you can cope with, do not hesitate to call your health care provider for help.

Normal “baby blues” symptoms may include:

- Lack of sleep
- No energy
- Anxiety or worry
- Sadness
- Confusion or nervousness

- Concern over physical changes
- Crying more
- Oversensitivity
- Irritability
- Excitability

Some mothers may experience postpartum depression. Symptoms may include:

- Frequent sadness or crying
- Changes in appetite
- Trouble sleeping
- Intense fatigue with low mood
- Emotional numbness
- Feelings of helplessness
- Irritability, surges of anger
- Feelings of inadequacy, guilt or shame
- Difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness
- Repetitive fears, thoughts or images
- Lack of interest in sex
- Lack of feelings for your baby
- Exaggerated high or low moods

Some women may not feel depressed but may feel very anxious. This is known as postpartum anxiety. Symptoms may include:

- Intense anxiety and/or fear
- Rapid heart rate
- Sense of despair
- Hot or cold flashes
- Chest pain
- Shaking
- Dizziness
- Insomnia

These symptoms are often caused by a hormone imbalance, which may require treatment by medication and/or counseling. Call your health care provider if you experience any of these symptoms.

## If you had a cesarean section

- Keep the incision (wound) clean and dry. Usually you may shower beginning the first day after surgery, but you should have no tub baths for one to two weeks or until your health care provider allows them.
- Your incision may be covered with Steri-strips (little strips of tape that help the incision heal). You can get the Steri-strips wet in the shower, and you can remove the strips after seven days if they have not already fallen off.
- Look at your incision daily with a hand mirror. Report any redness, swelling, separation, drainage or foul odor from or around your incision to your health care provider.
- It's OK to lift your baby, but don't lift anything heavier than 15 pounds for the first six weeks.
- Avoid sitting for long periods with your knees bent or crossed. This position can cause blood clots to form.
- Avoid driving for the first two weeks or until your health care provider allows you to do so.
- Kegels are the only exercise you should do until your six-week checkup, unless advised by your health care provider. Walking for short periods is fine with rests in between. (Check with your health care provider if you need information on Kegels.)

**Note:** You may find that an abdominal binder, prescribed by your health care provider, gives you additional support during your recovery.

Most of all, listen to your body. You will know you are overdoing it if your bleeding increases or if your incision, abdomen or back begins to hurt when you're doing an activity.

## Uterus

Immediately after your baby is born, your uterus becomes firm and about the size of a large grapefruit. If your abdomen still looks pregnant after delivery, this is normal and will gradually decrease in size.

After six weeks, your uterus should return to its normal size, similar to a small pear. While you are in the hospital, your nurses will check your uterus regularly for location and firmness. Some mothers, especially second-time mothers, feel painful after-birth contractions when breast-feeding. These contractions, caused by hormones released when you breast-feed, usually disappear in five to seven days. In the meantime, if you experience such contractions, try the following steps to ease pain:

- Apply heat to your abdomen.
- Take mild, nonaspirin pain relievers (such as ibuprofen) before breast-feeding.
- Gently massage your abdomen.
- Keep your bladder empty.
- Do deep-breathing and relaxation exercises.

## Lochia (vaginal discharge) and menstruation

Some vaginal discharge or “lochia” will usually be present for at least two to three weeks after you give birth. Initially it will be red with small clots. Notify your health care provider if you pass clots larger than a golf ball or if you notice a foul odor to your vaginal discharge. Within eight days of your baby’s birth, the discharge may be pink or brown-tinged. It is normal for the flow to increase whenever you increase your level of activity, even if it is simply getting out of bed.

If the flow turns bright red and becomes heavy after you leave the hospital, you should rest and count the pads you use. If rest does not slow the flow and you saturate a pad in less than one hour, call your health care provider.

After giving birth, women start menstruating again on varying schedules. It may take a few months for your cycles to become regular again. Nursing mothers often find it takes 18 weeks or longer to resume menstruation after giving birth.

**Note:** You can become pregnant before your menstrual periods resume, and you can become pregnant even if you are breast-feeding. Be sure to discuss family planning with your care provider.

## Showers and baths

You may take showers or (after vaginal deliveries) baths. No special vaginal care is necessary. However, don’t put anything in your vagina for four to six weeks after birth: no tampons, douching or intercourse.





## Perineal care after vaginal delivery

The perineum is the area between your vagina and rectum. For comfort and to prevent infection after giving birth, use a peri-wash squirt bottle to clean the perineal area in a front-to-back direction after you go to the bathroom or when your vaginal discharge is heavy. Continue to use the peri-wash bottle until bloody vaginal flow has decreased. You may gently wash the area with soap and a soft washcloth as you shower or bathe.

On the first day, you may apply ice packs to the perineum to reduce swelling and pain. After that, you may find that soaking in a fresh bath for 10 to 20 minutes several times a day helps relieve pain and discomfort. Your health care provider may prescribe medicated pads and/or anesthetic spray for comfort.

Vaginal and episiotomy stitches will dissolve during the healing process. They do not need to be removed. Limit intense activity, particularly lifting, for at least two to three weeks. You may be more comfortable if you lie down rather than sit for prolonged periods of time. Elevate your feet while sitting and, when you sit, use cushions. Placing a medicated pad against the stitches may reduce irritation. Call your health care provider promptly if you notice any of these signs:

- Increasing pain
- Redness
- A foul odor in the perineal area
- Fever



## Bladder care after delivery

It may take a few days for your bladder to return to normal and for you to regain your normal bladder control. Your urethra may have been bruised or the bladder overstretched during delivery. If you were catheterized after delivery, you may be more susceptible than usual to urinary tract infections. Drink plenty of liquids and empty your bladder at least every three to four hours.

It is normal to feel some tingling or slight discomfort when you urinate. If you feel burning or worsening pain, call your health care provider.

## Swelling

Both of your legs and feet may swell after you give birth. This is common. Although uncomfortable, it is not dangerous, nor is it a sign of infection or circulatory problems. You may take warm baths and elevate your feet to make yourself more comfortable. Within a week, the swelling should be gone.

## Bowels and hemorrhoids

Physical inactivity, narcotic pain medications and perineal soreness may cause constipation and gas. Try these simple tips to prevent or relieve constipation:

- Drink plenty of fluids – six to eight glasses of water a day.
- Eat fruits, including prunes and figs, leafy green vegetables, and whole-grain bread and cereals.
- Take stool softeners and/or laxatives as recommended by your health care provider.
- Establish a regular time to go to the bathroom.
- Begin taking walks.

**Note:** If you have rectal stitches, do NOT use an enema without consulting your health care provider first.

Hemorrhoids (painful, swollen veins in the anus) commonly occur during pregnancy and may become tender and inflamed after a vaginal birth. To relieve hemorrhoidal discomfort on the first day after giving birth, use ice packs to reduce swelling. After that, it may help to apply warm, moist heat to the area or to soak in warm water in a fresh bath. You may also try hemorrhoidal cream, medicated pads and/or anesthetic spray.

Avoid sitting or standing for long periods of time. Try to alternate periods of rest and activity. It is important to prevent constipation and straining with bowel movements, so increase your fluids and the fiber in your diet.

## Breast care

It is normal for your breasts to get bigger and tender two to five days after you give birth. You may be more comfortable if you wear a well-fitted, supportive bra (with no underwire) day and night as your body adjusts to these changes. Your breasts may leak milk for several weeks, so wear breast pads (cotton is best) until the leaking stops.

### Breast-feeding

For a few days after your baby is born, your breasts will secrete a thin, yellowish fluid called colostrum. Composed of water, fat and protein, colostrum contains substances that help your newborn's immune system. Although your milk does not "come in" for several days, your baby will get plenty to eat. Colostrum contains all the nutrients a newborn needs. Nursing your baby on demand up to 12 feedings per day acts as a good stimulus for milk production.

Wash your hands thoroughly before each feeding. Keep your breasts and nipples clean, but avoid harsh soap and drying lotions. There is no need to wash your breasts and nipples with soap. Clean water is best.

(continued)

## Breast care (continued)

### Nipple care

After several feedings, your nipples may become tender with the first few sucks as the baby latches on. This discomfort should improve within the first few weeks of nursing.

If your nipples become very sore, cracked or blistered, the baby is probably not latching on correctly. For breast-feeding help and guidance, you may call your health care provider or one of our lactation consultants.

Here are some comfort measures for sore nipples:

- Avoid using soap on nipples. Wash with warm water only.
- Expose your breasts to air and keep them as dry as possible.
- Apply purified lanolin nipple cream after breast-feeding as needed.
- Manually express a small amount of colostrum or breast milk; apply to sore nipples.

### Mastitis

Mastitis, an infection within the breast, may occur at any time while you are nursing. Symptoms of mastitis include:

- Fever higher than 100.4 F (38 C)
- Increased fatigue
- Flu-like symptoms
- A red, tender area in the breast
- Red streaks extending toward your armpit

If you experience any of these symptoms, call your health care provider immediately as medications may be necessary. Be sure to continue nursing or pumping your breasts.

### Engorgement

Engorgement is a process in which breast tissue swells and hardens. It lasts about 48 hours and causes varying degrees of discomfort. Some women feel only mild swelling and tenderness. Others have more pronounced soreness as their breasts become firm and the skin stretches and becomes tight and shiny.

If your breasts continue to be uncomfortable, try the following:

- Lie on your back.
- Apply ice packs made of crushed ice in plastic bags that will mold to your breasts. Be sure to have one layer of cloth (such as a towel) between your skin and the ice pack. Apply one ice pack to each breast for 20 minutes. Alternate them 20 minutes on and 20 minutes off until you are comfortable.
- Try placing cold, green cabbage leaves on the breasts, lining your bra. Some women have found this reduces discomfort. Change the leaves as they become warm and wilted.



## Diet and nutrition

After they give birth, mothers are usually busy and tired. They often find it difficult to eat regular meals and drink plenty of fluids, but these are important to postpartum recovery. You need energy and strength to care for yourself and your infant. You should eat three good meals daily and have healthy snacks and plenty of water throughout the day. Do not be overly concerned about losing the weight you gained during pregnancy. If you have prenatal vitamins left when your baby is born, continue taking them as prescribed.

If you are breast-feeding, your diet should include extra calories for milk production. You can do this easily by adding an extra serving of protein and calcium to your diet. You may also continue taking your prenatal vitamins while breast-feeding. Drink when you are thirsty, but avoid alcoholic beverages. Limit caffeinated drinks to one or two servings per day.



## Activity and exercise

Most women find that full recovery from childbirth takes from six to eight weeks. You may notice that you tire easily and that you welcome household help for a few weeks. Try to nap and rest as much as you can. This is a time to pamper yourself.

Because sitting slows the circulation to your legs, do not sit for too long. When you do sit, put your feet up. If you notice a red, hard and tender area on your leg just under the surface of the skin, or if one of your legs becomes swollen and painful, especially when you stand or walk, notify your health care provider immediately.

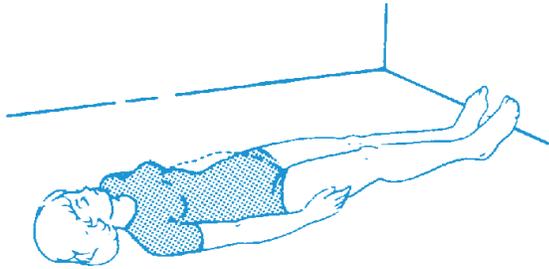
As your recovery progresses, you can increase the amount of activity and exercise in your daily routine. Exercise helps restore muscle tone, which is needed to protect your bones and joints. It will also help you lose the weight you gained during pregnancy. You can start these simple strengthening exercises as soon as you feel comfortable:

- Lie on your tummy with a pillow under your hips to relieve back strain. Relax your abdominals. Don't let your back sag.
- Tighten and release the perineal muscles (Kegel exercises) to tone muscles that were stretched during the birth process. Repeat 10 times at least twice daily.
- Lie on your back with your arms at your sides. Raise your head so that your chin touches your chest. Slowly lower your head. (Raising your head strengthens abdominal muscles.) Repeat 10 times, four times daily.

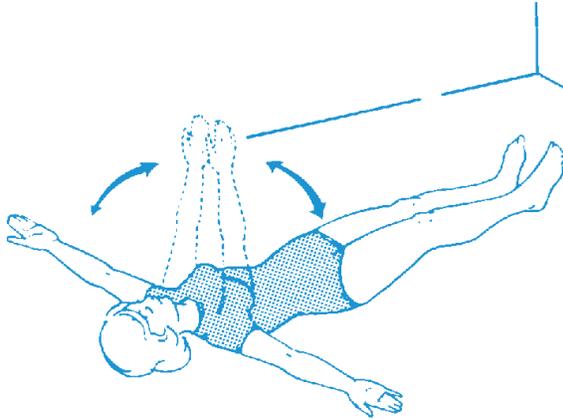
You can begin other exercises, such as those illustrated on the following page, in 10 to 14 days if you feel strong enough. Feel free to make minor changes in the movements. Yoga or stretching exercises are fine if they are not too strenuous. Walking is usually a good exercise for new mothers. Ask your health care provider about specific activities you want to undertake. Most health care providers recommend waiting six weeks before gradually resuming strenuous exercise. Remember to listen to your body; you will know if you are overdoing it.

## Exercises

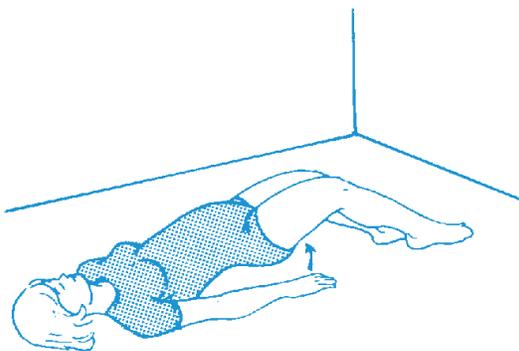
Add one new exercise each day. Begin by repeating the exercise five times and gradually increase to 10 times.



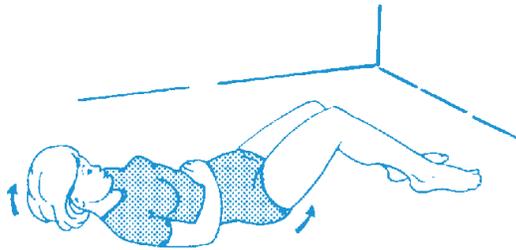
**First day:** Breathe deeply, expanding your abdomen. Hiss as you slowly exhale, then forcibly draw in your abdominal muscles.



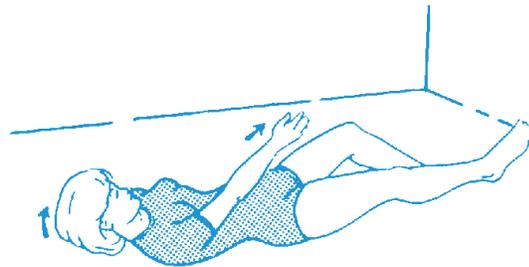
**Second day:** Lying on your back with your legs slightly apart, place your arms at right angles to your body and slowly raise them, keeping your elbows stiff. When your hands touch, lower your arms gradually.



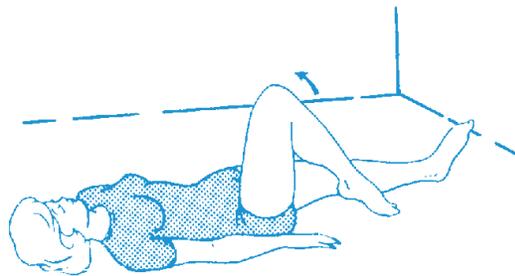
**Third day:** Lying with your arms at your sides, draw your knees up slightly, and arch your back.



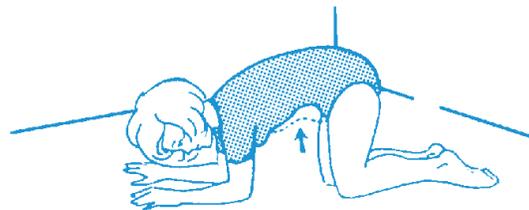
**Fourth day:** Lying with your knees and hips flexed, tilt your pelvis inward and tightly contract your buttocks as you lift your head.



**Fifth day:** Lying with your legs straight, raise your head and left knee slightly, then reach for (but do not touch) your left knee with your right hand. Repeat, using your right knee and left hand.



**Sixth day:** Lying on your back, slowly flex one knee and one thigh toward the abdomen; lower your foot toward your buttock, then straighten and lower your leg.



**Seventh day:** Leaning on your elbows and knees, keep forearms and lower legs together. Hump your back upwards, strongly contracting your buttocks and drawing in your abdomen. Then relax and breathe deeply.



## Returning to work

Many women who work outside the home return to their jobs when their babies are 6 to 12 weeks old. Consult your health care provider before driving, returning to work or going on out-of-town trips.

Many women successfully pump their breasts to continue the benefits of breastfeeding. Montana legislation protects your ability to pump your breasts while at work. If you need advice about pumping your breasts, contact one of our lactation consultants.

## Resuming sex

**Note:** Pregnancy can occur before your menstrual periods resume.

You will have an opportunity to discuss family planning with your health care provider at your postpartum visit. Most health care providers suggest refraining from intercourse until stitches stop hurting and the birth canal has healed. This usually takes four to six weeks after the baby is born. When you resume sexual intercourse, it may be beneficial to use additional lubrication and go slowly.





#### OUR MISSION

As people of Providence,  
we reveal God's love for all,  
especially the poor and vulnerable,  
through our compassionate service.

#### OUR CORE VALUES

Respect, Compassion, Justice,  
Excellence, Stewardship

[providence.org/stpatsbabies](http://providence.org/stpatsbabies)

