



## Taking Good Care of Yourself Postpartum

I do not leave you after birth until I am satisfied that you and your newborn are healthy and recovering well. I will ask you to remain vigilant for signs of concerns and that you have a support person with you continuously during the first 24 hours after birth. Typically, I return to your home to check on you and your baby on days 1 & 3 and again at 10-14 days. Our final visit takes place in the office at 4-6 weeks postpartum.

### **BLEEDING**

Occasionally check your uterus for firmness for the first 24 hours. Before I leave, I will show you how to firmly massage the sides and top of your uterus with two hands to cause a contraction – this will help slow or stop bleeding. The baby's nursing and a full bladder will also cause contractions. You may notice small clots or gushes of blood when you change positions or stand up. This is normal and is caused by blood pooling in the vagina when you were lying down. **Let me know if you soak more than 1 pad in 30 minutes or pass fist-sized clots. Call immediately if you have bright red bleeding that won't stop flowing.**

Uterine bleeding will change color and amount as the uterus shrinks back to its original size. You will have red bleeding for several days. You should use pads rather than tampons. As the flow begins to decrease, it will resemble the end of your period, appear pink or brownish in color, and continue to decrease in amount. In general, any increase in red bleeding during the first two weeks is your body telling you: **YOU ARE DOING TOO MUCH.** The first 2 weeks after birth is your time to reap the rewards of your labor: gaze, graze, nurse, drink, sleep and let/ask others do the housework and errands. Remember, you are now engaged in the work of meeting all the nutritional and suckling needs of your new baby, as well as recovery of your non-pregnant body!

There may be a brief return to red bleeding around day 10-14 after delivery. This is caused by the final shedding of the placental site. If you have increased bleeding at this time, bleeding should be self-limiting and decrease to minimal within 24-48 hours.

### **SORE BOTTOM**

You will probably be sore and tender for several days, especially if this is your first birth. Your bones, muscles, and tissue stretched amazingly around your baby. If you had a tear during birth, then give your bottom extra loving care. Avoid stairs and standing, slide carefully in and out of bed, and don't lift anything heavier than the baby until your bottom is feeling better. If you had stitches they will dissolve by themselves in 10-14 days.

You should urinate within 6 hours after delivery. Make sure there is someone with you the first few times you get up in case you feel weak or dizzy. Move slowly and give yourself lots of time. Try to relax your thighs and perineal muscles when you are on the toilet. Use your peri-bottle with warm water if you are afraid it might sting or just to help you relax. Sometimes the pressure from the baby's head will have numbed the urethra and it will take time for inflammation to decrease and sensation to return. It may feel easier to urinate in the shower.

Other techniques that promote urination, relief and healing are: using your squirt/spray bottle filled with the herbal infusion to rinse your bottom after each urination (the herbs are anti-bacterial, tissue-regenerating, and anti-inflammatory); gently blotting yourself dry from front to back; applying the herbal ice packs we made for you; leaving your bottom open to air (sitting on towels or chucks); sitting on a boppy or donut; side-lying; bathing (wait 24 hours after birth. Try adding 2-4 cups herbal infusion to the bath). Wait until all discharge has stopped and your cervix is closed (usually 3-6 weeks) before resuming swimming or hot-tubbing in a public place.

Call me if you notice increasing swelling or pain in your vagina or rectum. Sometimes a blood vessel under the skin can break during labor, and the blood leaks into the surrounding tissues. This is called a hematoma

and is sometimes not noticeable until several hours after birth. A hematoma can become very painful and occasionally needs to be surgically drained.

### **YOUR BREASTS TAKE OVER WHERE YOUR PLACENTA LEFT OFF**

Trust your breasts and your baby to know what to do – nature has been perfecting this relationship for millions of years! Breasts are vital organs that meet most of your baby’s critical needs in his/her new home: warmth and protection, nourishment and immunity, colonizing flora and fauna, and a perfect sanctuary for his/her senses to open and unfold. These wonders work best when your baby is skin-to-skin with you.

Sometimes nipples get sore at the start of their new workout. We will help you make sure your baby is latching and sucking correctly. You can express your own colostrum or milk to massage into your nipples and areolas for lubricating and healing relief. After air-drying, you can also apply pure lanolin. Air and sunlight are very healing for nipples, at the same time keep yeast at bay. Many women find going without a bra and shirt the first few days simplifies life with a newborn, helps breasts and nipples feel better and the milk come in quicker, and keeps entertaining at a minimum. Don’t over-wash or use soap on your breasts (or baby for that matter) – you’ll wash away free health care.

After your milk comes in, your body will still need up to 2 weeks to adjust supply (your milk) to demand (your baby’s sucking). At first filling, your breasts may be in “over-drive” and feel hot, hard, and painful. Let your baby nurse on demand and avoid all other stimulation, even the spray of water in the shower. Massage or pump **only as necessary** to soften your breasts enough to enable your baby to latch. Pump after a feeding **only as needed for comfort**. In between feedings, you can apply ice-cold washcloths, ice packs, or bags of frozen peas or corn for effective relief and to slow down milk production. Stay vigilant for reddened or painful areas in your breasts and meeting your own nutritional and sleep needs. **If you develop a fever over 100F and your breasts are painfully full, call me immediately and we will work together to prevent or minimize mastitis.**

### **AFTER PAINS**

You may have cramping after birth, especially after your second and each subsequent child. Cramps are worst when the baby nurses and any time the uterus is clamping down. The cramping is usually a good sign, because it means your uterus is returning to its normal size and closing tiny bleeding vessels. It can help to try: deep breathing; a hot water bottle or heating pad on your belly or back; emptying your bladder prior to breastfeedings; using an herbal tincture for cramping such as “Contract Ease;” taking Calcium/Magnesium and/or homeopathic arnica. While less is always more, you may take up to 800mg of Ibuprofen (much more effective than Tylenol) every four hours. Never take aspirin.

If the cramps are severe and persistent, there may be a large clot in your uterus that is causing the muscle to work harder in order to expel it. Sit on the toilet and place one hand on either side of your uterus. Massage your uterus between your hands as firmly as possible until you have expelled the clot or ruled out this problem.

### **SIGNS OF INFECTION**

It is normal for your uterus, bottom, and just your whole body to feel achy the first few days after labor and birth, especially as you increase activity. It is also normal to run a slight temperature and feel flu-like during the 24-48 hours your milk comes in. On the other hand, **call me immediately if your temperature is over 100F degrees, your perineal, uterine or abdominal pain is acute, urination becomes painful, nursing becomes painful or you have painful areas in your breasts.**

### **NOURISHMENT**

You may urinate a lot and perspire in the first week or so after the birth. This is your body’s way of getting rid of extra fluid accumulated in pregnancy. During this time, drink plenty of fluids so you don’t get dehydrated. Dehydration will make you feverish, headachy, and inhibit your milk production. Some good fluids include postpartum herbal teas (“Mother’s Milk,” “Nursing Mom,” etc.), pure fruit and vegetable juices, and water. Eat nutrient-dense foods that are high in iron and protein to help you heal and build your milk supply. Continue your prenatal supplements during the entire time you are lactating. Remember, you need even more fluids and calories while nursing than you did in pregnancy!

While nursing, most women have ravenous appetites. Just as in pregnancy, your hunger may mirror your baby's – you may find yourself eating more during your baby's growth spurts. Enjoy your virtually limitless ability to eat without gaining weight! Most women actually lose weight while lactating. You will notice this especially between 6 to 12 months, and studies have found that breastfeeding women lose weight in their thighs and buttocks (while women who bottle-feed often struggle to lose in these areas).

### **FIRST BOWEL MOVEMENT**

Your first BM after birth often is delayed 2-3 days and softer than usual. To help ease discomfort you may press against your perineum with a pad or toilet paper to support the area during the first couple of bowel movements. Fibrous foods like ground flaxseed and oatmeal and lots of fluids are all good for the GI tract. If you haven't had a bowel movement by the third postpartum day, drink a cup of ground flaxseed tea. Put 1-2 tablespoon(s) of ground flaxseeds in a cup and add boiling water. Cover and let sit for 20 to 30 minutes for a creamy and mild tea or gruel that you can sweeten to taste. This is a gentle and effective laxative/stool softener that is safe at any time before and after birth.

### **HEMORRHOIDS**

A hemorrhoid is a swollen vein in the rectum. They are quite common after childbirth and can be painful. The hemorrhoids will disappear more quickly if you can prevent constipation and straining by drinking plenty of fluids and eating fiber (flaxseed tea as above, whole grains, raw fruit and veggies). Go to the bathroom as soon as you get the urge and avoid standing, lifting, and prolonged sitting on the toilet.

There are a host of remedies to try. Experiment with these:

- Tucks pads and/or ice packs for pain and swelling
- Elevate your hips 15 minutes twice a day
- Gently try to tuck the hemorrhoid back inside the rectum with a lubricated finger
- Drink Calendula tea or take a dropperful of tincture twice daily
- Apply Horse Chestnut cream or Calendula salve externally
- 2-4 cups of the pre-made herbal infusion in the bath (to make more, add ½ cup each witch hazel, comfrey, calendula to one gallon boiled water, steep 4 hours and strain)

### **TAKE TIME TO REST**

*Cleaning and scrubbing  
Can wait 'til tomorrow,  
For babies grow up  
We've learned to our sorrow.  
So quiet down cobwebs,  
Dust, go to sleep.  
I'm rocking my baby, and babies don't keep.  
-anonymous author*

Traditional cultures around the world set aside a specific time period after a woman gives birth for her to rest and be mothered, while she learns to mother her baby. I encourage you to guard these precious days of exploration and discovery. Try to regard resting and napping as a priority rather than an indulgence. If you don't take time now to rest and heal you may pay for it later in prolonged bleeding and nipple soreness, breast infections, or diminished immunity.

Gone are the solid 8 hour blocks of sleep you used to enjoy, **so sleep when the baby sleeps**. This may be hard if you have other small children. Try having a box of special toys that only come out when you need rest. Lie on the couch and doze while the other children play. Setting out little snacks and filling sippy-cups will help eliminate the need for you to be jumping up supplying things. Wait until bleeding has stopped to resume heavy chores like scrubbing and vacuuming (give dust bunnies permission to grow into dust buffalo). Limit visitors to short visits at first (playing hostess or just "being on" is exhausting) and don't be afraid to ask them to do something

useful for you. Don't get trapped into feeling obligated to anyone or anything other than yourself, your baby, and your basic needs.

**Being born with an immature gut makes ALL babies amazingly gassy, squirmy, noisy creatures, especially at night.** By four months of age, the human gut is fully lined, and infants are generally happy with the world (until teething starts – but that's another story!). In the meantime, here are several tried-and-true tips for promoting overall amount of sleep. All include night-nursing on demand, which is essential to maintaining your milk supply over time. Above all, trust your maternal instincts and your child.

Three restorative rest/sleep rules:

1. **keep it dark** (even to go to bathroom or change diapers – flashlights are preferred if light is needed)
2. **go to bed early** - at 7, 8, 9pm or as soon as your baby allows. This almost always ensures more overall sleep.
3. **have all needed items within arm's reach of your pillow** – your baby, your flashlight, diapers, wipes, food, water, etc.

Tips that work for many families:

- trust your abilities and keep perspective. Just when it seems you can't do this any longer (or conversely, just when you figured out a problem) it will change! Remind each other regularly, this stage in your lives – both sweet and overwhelming – is very short.
- accomplish side-lying nursing. The sooner you are able to sleep with your baby in your armpit and attach him/her, half-awake, to your breast, the sooner your nights will be manageable. You will figure out how to turn over as a single unit to switch sides, or prop your baby on a pillow in order to reach the other breast.
- plan to sleep late - until 10 or 11am. Most infants < 4 months of age will have frequent night feedings/wakings and then sleep solidly during the morning hours
- physical activity, fresh air, and stimulation during the day help all parties sleep better
- the partner/support person can do everything at night except feeding – diaper-changing, linen-changing, burping, rocking, etc. By about 8 weeks, your higher fat milk will have developed – this milk takes longer to digest and feedings/wakings will space out, at the same time your baby might skip nighttime bowel movements, eliminating nighttime diaper changes (yay!).
- at a certain point in the night or early weeks, baby swaddling and/or a co-sleeper is useful for some families. Just be sure you don't miss nighttime feeding cues. And if your baby is not on top of you or right beside you, he/she should be on his/her back.

## **YOUR CHANGING POSTPARTUM BODY**

Immediately after birth, your belly feels like jello and still looks as though you are 5 months pregnant. This “jello” acts as a protective buffer of nutrients and calories that will help you make milk for breastfeeding. Remember that your body is the baby's sole source of nutrition. Nursing alone requires 1,000 extra calories each day and 500 more calories per day than you needed in pregnancy. To avoid fatigue and hypoglycemia, it is recommended that you weigh about 10 pounds above your ideal weight while you are exclusively breastfeeding (giving no food besides breastmilk). It is universally recommended that infants exclusively breastfeed for a minimum of 6 months.

You can start doing kegel exercises soon after the birth. Try a few every time you nurse to increase circulation and healing to pelvic tissues and strengthen urethral and vaginal tone. After your milk supply is established and you have surplus energy, activities around the house with your baby in a sling and short walks outside are wonderful ways to integrate exercise and regain abdominal tone. Hold off on long walks and aerobics until your bleeding has stopped and your cervix is closed (usually 3-6 weeks).

Many women find sex is better after childbirth. The most important thing in resuming sex is honest communication. You may be feeling tired, over-touched in general, or unsure of HOW your body feels. Your partner may be tired from picking up the slack around the house or feeling sidelined from your intimate breastfeeding experience with the baby. Be sensitive to one another and focus on how the birth and baby have added new dimensions to your relationship. Take extra care about lubrication, because breastfeeding makes the vagina (all mucous membranes) drier.

The return of fertility is as individual as each woman. Breastfeeding can hold off ovulation in some women until weaning, especially when the baby nurses at night and no pacifiers or bottles have been introduced. Other exclusively breastfeeding women begin ovulating at 4 weeks! Remember that you will ovulate before you get your period. Also, fertility awareness signs can be difficult to read while lactating. Therefore, if you want to be certain to avoid conception during intercourse, use a method of protection after 4-6 weeks postpartum.

## **EMOTIONS**

For many women this is an emotionally vulnerable time, a roller coaster of ups and downs. The joy of the new baby and your tremendous accomplishment combined with rapidly changing hormones and fatigue can be overwhelming, similar to the first trimester of pregnancy. If labor and birth were not what you hoped or expected, you may feel sadness, confusion, grief. They were likely some of the hardest work and most intense experiences of your life. You may be processing and integrating new feelings and thoughts daily. Your baby changes hourly and daily. The first 2 weeks after birth can feel like “survival mode.” This is normal and works to keep you vigilant and close to home, your sanctuary and safety zone.

Please feel free to discuss any question, need, confusion, or issue with me. I encourage you to celebrate your unique birth story and to discover common ground with other mothers. The local birthing community is rich in diversity, compassion and resources: Happy Bambino postpartum group meetings; postpartum yoga; La Leche League meetings; postpartum doula services; the homebirthing yahoo group; a free and confidential Parent Stressline, operating from 6am to midnight at 608-241-2221. We offer more information on all these services and more. Whether this is your first child or fifth child, a whole new family is being born – mobilize your “village” as you need it!

Normal postpartum “blues” come and go, last about 10 days and are helped by positive family support and rest. If you experience depression or despondency beyond ten days after birth, please let me know so I can help you get support. We are all in this together!

