



# Postpartum

• **10%** of breastfeeding women will develop mastitis.<sup>1</sup>

Up to **75%** of women will experience vaginal tears during delivery.<sup>1</sup>

Up to **84%** of new mothers will experience the 'baby blues'.<sup>1</sup>

## 'The 4th Trimester'

After making it through 3 trimesters of pregnancy and the successful delivery of your baby, you may be shocked to hear there is in fact 1 more trimester to go.

The fourth trimester is a new distinct stage of pregnancy that has only recently started to get the attention it deserves. This stage begins following the birth of your baby and ends once they turn 3-months old.

Pregnancy is a very important life stage for many women, and this is reflected in the regular health monitoring all pregnant women receive during their prenatal visits.

While there is rightfully a lot of focus on preconception and the three trimesters that follow, it feels as though the general perception of this life stage gets hazier once your baby is born. While it's widely accepted that it can take a while to 'bounce back' to your pre-pregnancy self what does this recovery process actually look like?

This fact sheet will discuss some of the common physical and emotional aspects of post-partum recovery to help you prioritize your health and well-being as you care for your new baby.

**Typically, there is only one routine postpartum visit with your care provider around 2 to 6-weeks following delivery.<sup>1</sup>**

## Vaginal birth vs. C-section

### Vaginal birth

Following a vaginal birth, it is normal to experience a fair amount of soreness and swelling. As your body recovers, your vagina will contract and regain muscle tone. Full recovery can take anywhere from 3-weeks if you did not tear and up to 6-weeks if you did (see the following page for details on vaginal tears).

### C-section

Following a C-section, many women will spend 2-3 days in the hospital recovering. Full recovery can take anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks and may be aided by regular walking, though it's best to speak to your care provider before you attempt even mild physical activity. If your C-section was unplanned, it's likely you spent a bit of time pushing, and you may have some vaginal pain along with pain around your C-section incision.

# Postpartum Recovery

No matter how easy your pregnancy and delivery, the first 6-weeks postpartum are considered a recovery period. Your body has been operating at maximum capacity for 9-months and it will take a while before you feel like yourself again – both physically and emotionally.



Whether you are new to motherhood or not, it's easy to feel overwhelmed as you navigate the early days with your newborn. If this is your first baby, it's normal to be faced with some anxiety and 'what ifs' – what if I'm not good at being a parent? What if my baby isn't eating or sleeping enough? What if my body never goes back to the way it was? For seasoned parents, postpartum can still present new and unexpected challenges; just as no two pregnancies are the same, no two recoveries will be the same either.

## Physical Recovery

### Perineal pain

The perineum is the length of tissue and muscle separating a woman's vaginal opening from her anus. During labour, the intense pressure of your baby's head pushing against the vaginal opening can cause the perineum to become swollen and even tear.

In certain circumstances, your doctor may need to make a small incision in your perineal tissue to widen the vaginal opening – this is called an episiotomy. If you experienced a tear or episiotomy during delivery, it takes a bit longer, often weeks, for those tissues to formally heal.

### How to promote recovery

- Apply ice every couple of hours for the first 24hrs following delivery.
- Ask your provider about oral pain relief such as Tylenol or Advil.
- Commit to wearing loose fitting clothing to avoid chafing or irritation.
- Spray warm water before and after passing urine to minimize irritation to torn skin.
- Take a warm sitz bath for 20 minutes every day to ease the pain and promote recovery.
- Stay hydrated and increase your fibre intake to keep your bowel movements soft and regular – it can be painful to pass a bowel movement while this area is healing.

### Postpartum bleeding

Postpartum bleeding can last for up to 6 weeks. Often described as a very heavy period, this is your body's way of healing itself after delivery. This bleeding is heaviest for the first 3 to 10 days before tapering off – it's normal for the discharge to change from red to pink to brown to yellow-white.

While it's normal for your bleeding pattern to vary throughout the day, if you begin to pass large clots or notice you are bleeding through more than 1 pad every hour, call your doctor right away or attend the nearest emergency department. It's also important to note that tampons should not be used for postpartum bleeding due to the risk of infection.

### How to promote recovery

- Stock up on lots of maxi pads – you will likely need these for the first few weeks following delivery.
- Invest in cotton underpants or hospital gauze underwear.

## Breast changes

It is normal for your breasts to feel tender and swollen over the first few weeks following delivery. Now that your baby is here, your pregnancy hormones diminish, signaling to your body it's time to produce breast milk. All women, whether they decide to breastfeed or not, should see the swelling subside in a few days.

If you start to develop flu-like symptoms or notice that either one of your breasts becomes extra painful – it's very likely you have developed a breast tissue infection called mastitis. Mastitis occurs when one of the breast milk ducts becomes clogged, trapping in harmful bacteria.

Mastitis often improves on its own without the use of antibiotics, however if your symptoms persist for over 24 hours it's best to speak to your care provider about an urgent prescription. In the meantime, continue breast feeding on that side and use a warm compress to help encourage the breast to drain.

## How to promote recovery

- Use a warm compress or ice packs to help ease tenderness and swelling.
- Apply compression or massage the breast to help encourage drainage and relieve swelling.
- Invest in a comfortable nursing bra.
- Use lanolin cream to help treat and prevent cracked nipples.

## Postpartum belly changes

It's normal to be thinking about your post-partum body; you have just spent months watching it change and grow to accommodate your little one. Now that your baby is here, you may be wondering how long it will take for your body to 'bounce back' to its pre-pregnancy state. Many women will be familiar with the stories of friends or colleagues who achieved their pre-pregnancy physique almost immediately after giving birth – this is the exception, not the rule.

Following delivery, many women will look about 6-months pregnant – this is to be expected. Over the next 6 weeks your belly will gradually slim down and your abdominal muscles and skin will begin to firm up. By 6 to 8 weeks post-partum, your uterus will have returned to its normal size and position.

There is no recommended timeline for post-partum weight loss. During the first 6 weeks following delivery, your body is in recovery mode and it's best to focus on rest and healing before turning your attention to weight loss. It takes most women over 6 months and other women a few years to get back to their pre-pregnancy weight.

## How to promote recovery

- Gradually build up your exercise routine once you have received the 'okay' from your provider. Focus on core strengthening exercises like crunches and bridges.
- Focus on eating healthy, well-balanced meals that are high in plant-based whole foods with limited packaged and processed options.
- Be patient – everybody and every body is different, while it's normal to want your pre-pregnancy body back as soon as possible, go easy on yourself and trust the process.

# Emotional Recovery

## 'Baby blues'

Within the first 3 or 4 days of childbirth it is normal to experience 'baby blues'. It is very common for women to feel sad, anxious, and tearful in response to fluctuating hormone levels and sleep deprivation. These feelings usually dissipate on their own in a few days or weeks.

Symptoms may include one or more of the following:

- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Crying spells
- Loss of appetite
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling overwhelmed or irritable
- Difficulty concentrating

## How to promote recovery

- Go easy on yourself and remember these feelings will pass.
- Lean on your support network and ask for help when you need it.
- Prioritize regular eating - it's important to keep your energy levels up, especially for breastfeeding moms.
- Get outside - a change of scene can help boost your mental wellbeing.

## Postpartum depression

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a deeper depression that lasts much longer than 'baby blues'. Women with PPD often experience depressed mood, loss of interest in things that would normally bring pleasure (including their baby), sleep disturbances, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, or in some cases, recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. It is estimated that up to 23% of Canadian women will develop PPD following childbirth.<sup>1</sup>

Symptoms of PPD tend to be more pronounced and more enduring, lasting anywhere from weeks to years:  
Persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness or helplessness

- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling withdrawn or isolated
- Severe anxiety
- Crying
- Having worried, negative and or obsessive thoughts about your baby
- Having thoughts of self-harm or harming your baby

## How to promote recovery

- Psychotherapy
- Support groups
- Antidepressants



## Postpartum anxiety

Many women are told that sadness, in the form of baby blues and post-partum depression, is common following delivery; however, very few will have been counselled on the possibility of extreme anxiety during the postpartum period. Postpartum anxiety, characterized by extreme anxiety, fearfulness and panic attacks, affects 10-15% of new moms.<sup>2</sup> While some anxiety is normal during the early days of parenthood, postpartum anxiety is more intense than typical parent worrying.

Symptoms may include one or more of the following:

- Racing thoughts
- Excessive worry about the baby's health, development or safety
- Excessive worry about the ability to be a good parent
- Difficulty sleeping
- Dizziness and nausea
- Shaking
- Panic attacks

### How to promote recovery

- Lean on your support network and ask for help when you need it.
- Psychotherapy
- Antidepressants for more severe cases

## Postpartum Warning Signs

This fact sheet has outlined some of the common physical and emotional symptoms women face during the fourth trimester. Here are some warning signs to watch out for - if you begin to experience any of the following symptoms, contact your care provider immediately or attend the nearest emergency department.

### Physical symptoms

See a healthcare provider in person immediately:

- Very heavy bleeding requiring >1 pad per hour or large clots
- A red, hot, swollen leg
- Severe headache that does not respond to medication
- Severe headache with vision changes
- A fever over 38.5 degrees Celsius
- An incision that isn't healing

Call 911 immediately:

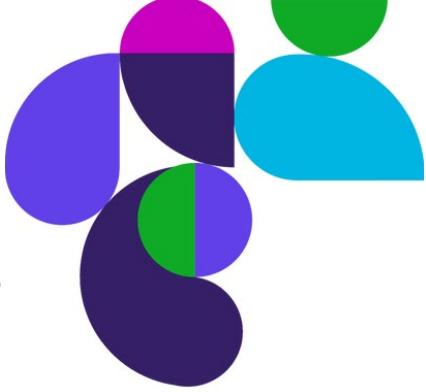
- Chest pain
- Seizures
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath

### Emotional symptoms

Call 911 immediately:

- Harmful thoughts towards yourself or your baby
- Attempts to harm yourself or your baby
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Extremely erratic, paranoid and/or life-threatening behavior

**Postpartum depression can begin anywhere from a few weeks to 12 months after delivery and last up to 3 years.<sup>2</sup>**



## Postpartum Checkup

Current practice in Canada recommends only 1 routine postpartum check-up, however the new-found emphasis on fourth-trimester care may encourage some women or providers to opt for closer follow-up. Here is what you can expect from your postpartum check-up:

- Pelvic exam
- Pap smear (if due)
- Breast exam
- Blood pressure check
- Weight check
- Inspection of C-section scar (if applicable)
- Inspection of vaginal tears (if applicable)
- Discussion of postpartum symptoms
- Discussion of plan or 'go-ahead' for exercise, sexual activity, contraception and future pregnancies

## How can Teladoc Health help?

"I'm looking for a care provider to discuss my non-urgent postpartum symptoms." ..... [Find a Doctor](#)

"I'm looking for additional resources on postpartum education and community support" ..... [Personal Health Navigator](#)

"I'm looking for a second opinion on a medical condition related to my pregnancy." ..... [Expert Medical Opinion](#)

"My pregnancy journey has taken an emotional toll; I'm looking for mental health support." ..... [Mental Health Navigator](#)

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