



# Caring for Yourself After the Loss of Your Baby

This handout has been divided into three parts to help you know about:

- ▶ **The physical changes you may experience after giving birth and how to take care of yourself**
- ▶ **The feelings you may have and things to do that may help.**
- ▶ **Who and when to call for help once you are home.**

We hope you find this handout helpful both while you are in the hospital and when you are at home.

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# **The Physical Changes You May Experience After Giving Birth and How to Take Care of Yourself**

## **Changes in Your Womb (Also called your uterus)**

After your baby is born your uterus is firm and round. The top of it can be felt just above your belly button which is also called the umbilicus. Each day after birth the uterus slowly gets smaller. Your nurse will feel it to make sure it is getting smaller and staying firm. By six to eight weeks after birth, your uterus is back to where it was before pregnancy.

## **Cramps (Also called after pains)**

Some women have after pains during the first week after the birth. After pains are caused by the relaxing and tightening or contraction of your uterus. They feel like labour pains. If you have had children before you are more likely to have strong after pains. They usually go away after the first week.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Do your relaxation and deep breathing exercises.
- ▶ Take pain medication.
- ▶ Put a warm water bottle on your tummy but only if you have had a vaginal birth.

## **Changes in Your Vaginal Discharge (Also called flow or lochia)**

Your vaginal discharge may last for six weeks. In the first three days after birth the discharge is bright red. It may have some small clumps of blood in it called clots and these should be about the size of a loonie. Five to seven days after birth, the amount of discharge should be less than at the beginning and change to a pinkish colour. After that time, the discharge should be yellowish white to brownish and small in amount, like the last days of your period or menstrual flow.

While you are in the hospital your nurse will be checking for the amount of flow. If you pass a clump of blood or clot larger than a loonie piece, please save it and show it to your nurse. If your discharge becomes heavier than your normal period or you have a “gush” of blood, call your nurse.

After you are home, if your flow soaks more than one maxi pad an hour for more than two hours or you notice a strong smell, call your doctor or midwife.

## **Changes in the Area Between Your Vagina and Rectum (Also called your perineum)**

Keep this area clean by using your peri-bottle each time you use the washroom. This is very important. The peri-bottle is the one given to you when you came to the unit. Always wash and wipe your perineum from front to back, and pat dry gently.

In the first twenty-four hours, put ice on your perineum to reduce swelling and decrease pain. Wrap the ice pack with a layer of cloth before putting it on your skin. A small wash cloth works

well. Putting ice right on your skin can hurt it. If you have stitches in your perineum they may hurt and itch while they heal.

You can keep using ice for 15 minutes at a time, several times a day, for as long as it is helping the pain. Sitting in warm water called a sitz bath may also help soothe and heal the area. If you have stitches this can also help heal them. There are two ways you can have a sitz bath:

1. Sit in your clean bathtub with warm water. Sit in the tub for ten minutes or so. Do this two to three times a day.
2. If you do not have a bathtub you might buy a sitz bath. The sitz bath is placed on your toilet seat. Fill it with warm water and sit in it for ten minutes or so. Do this two to three times a day. You can buy sitz baths in the gift shop and at some drug stores and medical supply stores.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Lie in bed after your sitz bath and air dry your perineum. Use your hair dryer on cool setting to help. Direct the air back and forth across your stitches, not straight on them.
- ▶ Do pelvic floor muscle exercises also called Kegels. Do both types described below.
  - **Speed'ems:** Pull your pelvic floor muscles up and in quickly and strongly as if to stop yourself from passing pee and gas. Hold only for 1 to 2 counts. Relax completely. Repeat 5 times. This exercise is important to help stop leaking pee when you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift. Do more as you are able, until you can do 20.
  - **Hold'ems:** Pull up and in as above and hold for a slow count of 5. Relax completely. Rest before trying your next one. Repeat 5 times. When this becomes easy, hold longer, up to 10 counts, and repeat up to 10 times.
- ▶ When you are at home call your doctor or midwife if:
  - your perineum feels different
  - becomes more painful or swollen
  - you notice some smelly discharge
  - the stitches have opened
  - you have other concerns

## **Changes in Your Breasts**

After birth your breasts produce milk and your milk “comes in.” Your breasts may feel warm and hard to the touch. Gentle hand expression and/or using a breast pump will help make you more comfortable. Expressing enough milk to keep you comfortable but not emptying the breasts results in your milk slowly drying up over time. The time it takes for milk to dry up varies from mother to mother. Drinking less, binding your breasts or taking drugs to dry up your milk are out dated and do not work.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Put cold compresses on your breasts. This helps to reduce the swelling and breast tenderness. It is easy to make compresses by using towels that have been run under cold water or bags of frozen vegetables.
- ▶ Stand in a warm shower and let the milk drip.

- ▶ Take pain medication.
- ▶ See your doctor if you have any sore , warm areas or lumps or redness on your breast. This may be from a breast infection and can be treated easily.

If you have been breastfeeding or pumping already the gentle hand expression or pumping, the passing of time and all the helpful hints listed above are important for you to do as well.

Some mothers find it helpful to express their milk regularly for a period of time and donate the milk to the milk bank in honour of their baby. This helps them to deal with the loss of their baby. There is a screening process to become a milk donor. The screening process is like the process used to donate blood. For information about donor screening or questions about decreasing your milk call 604-875-2282.

## **Cesarean Birth**

If you had a cesarean birth, the bandage covering your incision is usually taken off the day after your surgery. This helps the healing process. If staples were used to close your incision they are taken out by the nurse usually on the second or third day after the birth. By this time the skin has healed enough to stay together. Stitches that do not need to be removed dissolve in about seven days after birth.

You may have small tapes across your incision line. The tape helps to hold the incision together until it heals completely. You do not need to remove these tapes. They slowly peel off on their own. It is not unusual for the area around your incision to feel numb for a few months. The feeling will slowly return to normal.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Support your incision. Use a small pillow or your hands when coughing, sneezing, laughing or moving.
- ▶ Get in and out of bed from your side. This causes less strain on your stitches and your lower back.
- ▶ Move around in bed or walk within your room. You will have fewer aches and less stiffness. This will also help your bowels to move.
- ▶ Stand and walk tall.
- ▶ Keep your legs and feet elevated on the bed or footstool. This helps control the swelling in your feet and legs.
- ▶ Avoid heavy housework and lifting for the first 4-6 weeks.
- ▶ Wear loose clothing to avoid pressure and rubbing on your incision.

## **Care of Your Incision**

- ▶ Shower for the first several days.
- ▶ Do not use soap or rubbing alcohol on your incision.
- ▶ Do not lift anything heavier than about 10 pounds. As you lift light objects remember to keep your back straight, the object close to you and lift by using the strength in your legs.

For more information read the handout **Cesarean Birth** found in the holder on the wall by the nurse's station.

## **Management of Gas**

Gas pains are common after a cesarean birth. Some women have strong gas pains others do not. Gas pains are most likely to occur between one and four days after surgery.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ After a cesarean birth, you can eat what you feel like as soon as you feel ready and are not throwing up. Do not drink gassy fluids such as orange and apple juices, and drinks with bubbles in them such as sodas/
- ▶ Lying on your side with your knees bent is a good position. Change positions often.
- ▶ Take a few short walks each day. Increase the number of walks everyday as you are able.
- ▶ Drink warm drinks. It is better than cold drinks.

## **Changes in Temperature**

You may feel warmer as your breasts fill with more milk. This may happen even though you are not breastfeeding. Many women also find they sweat more than usual during the first twenty-four to forty eight hours after giving birth.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Drink six to eight glasses of water or clear fluids a day.
- ▶ Call your doctor or midwife if your temperature stays above 38 degrees Celsius.
- ▶ Dress in clothes that can keep you in a comfortable temperature.

## **Changes in Peeing (Also called urination)**

For the first one or two days you may not be able to feel when you need to pee. After that for the next five days you may need to pee often.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Drink six to eight glasses of water or clear fluids a day.
- ▶ Pee about every two to three hours.
- ▶ Call your doctor or midwife if you have problems when you pee such as:
  - feeling pain or pressure inside
  - a burning feeling
  - you are not able to pee
  - feeling a strong need to pee but very little comes out
  - needing to pee more than once an hour.

## **Leg and Ankle Swelling**

Your legs and ankles may be swollen during the first 24 to 48 hours. The swelling may not go down for several weeks. This is normal.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Put your feet up when you rest, watch TV or read. Try to have your feet above the level of your hips
- ▶ Do not cross your legs.
- ▶ If your legs and ankles become more swollen, red and painful, call your doctor or midwife.

## **Hemorrhoids**

Painful, itchy and sometimes bleeding veins that bulge out around your anus are called hemorrhoids. They may cause extreme pain near your anus during the first few days after the birth. Over time they slowly get smaller and in most cases disappear.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Put ice bags on the area right after birth. Keep doing this as long as it helps.
- ▶ Sit on a “ring” made out of towels or buy a soft rubber one. This takes the pressure off this area.
- ▶ Use a hemorrhoid cream which is ordered by your doctor or midwife or suggested by your pharmacist.
- ▶ Eat foods that are high in fiber and drink at least six to eight glasses of water a day.
- ▶ Lie in the bathtub with warm water.
- ▶ Clean the area after each poo (stool) with warm water from the peri-bottle and wipe gently.
- ▶ Do not sit on the toilet for a long time. Do not force bowel movements.
- ▶ Use laxatives or stool softeners as suggested by your doctor, midwife or pharmacist.

## **Hard Stools (Also called constipation)**

It may take up to one week for your normal bowel pattern to return. Eating more high fibre foods such as high fibre cereals, bran muffins, vegetables and fruits and drinking eight to ten glasses of fluids a day helps soften stools. Being active by walking, as you feel able, also helps. You may need to take a stool softener or mild laxative. Ask your doctor, midwife, nurse or pharmacist.

## **Managing Your Pain**

You may feel some pain for different reasons after your birth. How you deal with pain depends on your past experience. Try the methods of pain relief that have worked for you in the past. You may want to try ice packs, deep breathing, sitting on a soft rubber ring and pain medication to help relieve your pain. If the pain still stops you from relaxing tell your nurse, doctor, or midwife.

You may need some pain medication at home. Talk to your doctor or midwife about this before you leave the hospital.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Take pain medication regularly. This is usually every 4 to 6 hours during the first week .
- ▶ Pain medication works better if you take it before the pain gets too bad.

- ▶ If your pain medication is not keeping you comfortable, talk to your nurse, doctor or midwife.

## Eating Well

Grief may cause a loss of appetite or a desire to overeat along with less interest in preparing meals and snacks. Choosing healthy foods will help to support your emotional and physical health during this time.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Eat 5 to 6 small meals throughout the day and drink plenty of water.
- ▶ Focus on healthy choices such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein foods and low fat dairy products.
  - **Examples of lean proteins** are lean cuts of meat such as "round" or "loin", lean ground meat, skinless poultry or fish prepared without large amounts of added fat or salt, eggs, beans, lentils and tofu. Nuts and seeds and nut butters are relatively high in calories but contain heart-healthy fats. Enjoy them in moderate amounts.
  - **Examples of lower fat dairy products are:** skim, 1%, or 2% milk; 2% or less milk fat yogurt; lower fat cheese with 20% milk fat or less; and fortified soy milk.
- ▶ Limit caffeine, sugar, "fast" or "junk" food and alcohol.
- ▶ Consider taking a "daily" type multivitamin supplement.

To speak with a Dietitian: Call 811. Other resources that can help you are;

Canada's Food Guide: [www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide)

Healthy Eating: [www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian)

## Managing Your Energy

Give yourself a chance to regain your energy. It is important to look after yourself. The more you rest and take care of yourself the sooner your energy level will begin to return.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Take rest periods during the day.
- ▶ Slowly increase your activity each day.
- ▶ Have a support person with you for the first week or two. It is best if you feel very comfortable with this person.
- ▶ Take help from your partner, family and friends.
- ▶ Let others do things you do not have to such as housework.
- ▶ Take pain medication before doing uncomfortable activities.

Exercising helps you recover but remember to listen to your body and give yourself some time to heal. Usually your vaginal flow stops by 6 weeks. Up until this time avoid anything too strenuous. When you are ready start with going for short walks and increase your time, distance and speed as you feel stronger. Balance activity with rest. If you have pain that makes it hard to do your daily activities or leak pee, stool, or gas ask your nurse to have the physiotherapist see you or if you are at home call 604-875-2126.

## Having Sex Again

It is you and your partner's choice when you feel ready to have sex again. People handle their feelings of sadness in many different ways. Many people are not ready to have sex when they feel so sad about the loss of their baby. This is normal. Other people find comfort in physical closeness with their partner with or without sex. This is normal too. It is safe to have sex once your vaginal discharge has stopped. Ask yourself three other questions before having sex again:

- ▶ Is your perineum comfortable?
- ▶ What method of birth control are you going to use?
- ▶ Are you feeling like you want to?

If for any reason you feel you are not ready, talk to your partner. Your partner may be feeling the same way.

### *Helpful Hints:*

- ▶ Hugging, holding, snuggling, hand holding and back rubs are other ways to be feel close sexually if you are not ready to have intercourse.
- ▶ Spend time together and talk about how you are feeling.
- ▶ Use spermicidal foam or jelly as a method of birth control as this helps lubricate the vagina.
- ▶ If you have any concerns about having sex again or you are worried because you don't feel interested talk to your doctor, midwife or community health nurse.

## Birth Control

- ▶ You can become pregnant quite soon after baby was born, around four to nine weeks after birth. Couples need to choose a birth control method before having sex again.
- ▶ Talk about birth control methods with your doctor, midwife or community health nurse.

# The Feelings You May Have and Things To Do That May Help

## Feelings

Whether you or your family was prepared for your baby's death or whether this was an unexpected, sudden loss, the unthinkable has happened! Your beautiful, precious child has died.

In the early days after your baby dies, you may feel:

- as if you are in a dream or in a fog.
- that simple things don't make sense anymore.
- you can't concentrate or make decisions.
- overwhelmed and unable to do anything.
- other people may not want to talk about the loss.

You may have other puzzling experiences. You may have actually seen your baby or heard their cry after the baby died. While for a short time this can be a hopeful experience, it may also be frightening. You may wonder if you are losing your mind. This is a common situation and will pass with time.

When you are grieving you may have a strong feeling to want to be alone. This may even mean that you do not want to be around other close family members or friends.

## Activities for Healing After Your Baby's Death

After your baby's death, time alone won't heal the grief. These ideas may help.

1. **Take time to grieve.** Make time for your feelings, however painful. Play music to get to the passion of your grief. Go through mementos. Cry. You can also take a break from grief. Don't bury yourself in activity to avoid thinking about your baby.
2. **Do something with your feelings.** Write in a journal. Put together a memory box or album. Make something you had planned to make for the baby. Design a head stone for the grave.
3. **Design and send announcements of your baby's life to family and friends.** Putting it in writing shows the significance of this loss in your life.
4. **Talk to others.** Let them know how you feel. Tell them what you need. Seek others who have gone through something similar to you.
5. **Exercise.** Do it even if you do not feel like it. It won't get rid of grief but it will release some of the stress of grief.
6. **Put off major decisions for at least a year.** Delay changing jobs or moving to another town until you feel certain that you have come to terms with your grief.
7. **Be patient with your partner.** Everyone experiences grief differently. If your partner is not grieving like you, it does not mean they are not feeling it deeply.

8. **Be patient with yourself.**
9. **Take time to say goodbye to this baby.** The desire to have another baby maybe strong but give yourself time.
10. **Allow your next child to be his or her own person.** Choose a new name. Don't imply that the new child replaces this child by saving the old name. Each child deserves to have a special place in your heart.
11. **Reach out to others who are in need.** One mother chose to do random acts of kindness for others in her child's memory.
12. **Allow this child to change your life.** There is a gift in your child's short life. At first it may be hard to imagine but in time you may be amazed at what you receive.

# Who And When To Call For Help Once You Are Home

## *Taking Care of Yourself*

Once you are at home, call your doctor or midwife if:

- ▶ your bleeding soaks more than one **maxi** pad an hour for more than two hours.
- ▶ your vaginal flow smells bad.
- ▶ you have a fever greater than 38 degrees Celsius or 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit.
- ▶ you feel dizzy or faint and resting does not help.
- ▶ you have tummy pain other than normal after pains.
- ▶ the area between your vagina and anus becomes more swollen, sore or your stitches open up.
- ▶ you have problems when you pee such as:
  - feeling pain or pressure
  - a burning feeling
  - you are not able to pee
  - you feel a strong need to pee, but very little comes out
  - you need to pee more than once an hour
- ▶ your breasts become reddened and more painful.

After a cesarean birth, also call your doctor or midwife if your incision:

- ▶ becomes red, swollen or more painful.
- ▶ begins to have liquid coming out of it.
- ▶ starts to open up.

Once you are home, call your doctor, midwife, or your community health nurse if you are:

- ▶ feeling you can not manage.
- ▶ feeling you may harm yourself or others.

**If for some reason you can not speak to your doctor, midwife or your community health nurse please call the Healthlink BC at 811.**

**Translation services are available in over 130 languages. Please wait for the recorded message for a nurse to answer your call – ask for translation services in the language that you prefer or speak.**