

## Taking Good Care of Yourself Postpartum

### Immediate Postpartum Cares

I will not leave you after birth until I am satisfied you are healthy and recovering well. However, I will ask you to remain vigilant for signs of problems. I also ask that you have a support person with you continuously during the first 24 hours after birth.

### BLEEDING

Check your uterus for firmness every hour or so for the first 24 hours, especially if you feel weak or dizzy. Firmly massage your uterus to cause a contraction – this will help slow or stop bleeding. The baby's nursing will also cause contractions. Let me know if you soak more than 1 pad in 30 minutes. Call immediately if you have bright red bleeding that won't stop flowing OR call 911 if you feel it is life threatening.

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 a pad rather than a tampon for the first four weeks.

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 in no uncertain terms: YOU ARE DOING TOO MUCH. The first 2 weeks after birth is your time to reap the rewards of your labor: gaze, sleep, graze, nurse, drink and let/ask others do the house work and errands. Remember, you are now engaged in the less visible work of meeting all the nutritional and suckling needs of your new baby, as well as recovery of your non-pregnant body!

You may notice 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.

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 unexplained increased bleeding at this time, bleeding should be self-limiting and decrease to minimal well within 24-48 hours.

### SORE BOTTOM

You should urinate within 8 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 the herbal sitz bath or warm water if you are afraid it might sting or just to help you relax. Sometimes the pressure from the baby's head will numb the urethra and it will take time for sensation to return. Try techniques such as letting the tap water run, holding your fingers under running water, using the spray bottle, urinating in the shower, etc.

For the first few hours after birth, I recommend using the herbal ice packs we have made for you. This will reduce swelling, promote urination, and just feel good.

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. It is important that it be checked.

## **CLEANLINESS**

Use your squirt bottle every time you urinate. Fill it with the herbal sitz bath or warm water. Rinse your bottom with it after or during urination. Blot yourself dry rather than wiping. Always dry from front to back. 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.

## **AFTER PAINS**

Some women have lots of cramping after birth, some have none. They can come when the baby nurses and any time the uterus is clamping down. The cramping is usually a good sign: your uterus is returning to its normal size and closing tiny bleeding vessels. For most women, the afterbirth pains get more intense with each child. You can try: deep breathing; a hot water bottle or heating pad on your belly or back; emptying your bladder every time before you nurse; using an herbal tincture for cramping such as “Contract Ease” (available at Green Earth or Community Pharmacy) or Cramp Bark; taking Calcium/Magnesium every 2-4 hours. For severe cramping, you can take up to 600mg of Ibuprofen every four hours. Never take aspirin as it will cause you to bleed more and can cause jaundice in the newborn.

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.

## **The First Days and Weeks Postpartum**

### **SIGNS OF INFECTION**

Your uterus may feel achy the first few days after delivery. If you feel it is more tender than normal, take your temperature. You may run a slight temperature and feel flu-like on the day your milk comes in. Make sure to drink plenty of liquids to prevent running a temperature from dehydration. Call me if your temperature is over 100° F, if the vaginal discharge is foul smelling (it should smell like a regular period), or if uterine pain is becoming more intense.

### **CARE OF YOUR PERINEUM**

You will probably be sore and tender for a few days, especially if this is your first birth. Your bones, muscles, and tissue have been amazingly stretched. If you had a tear during birth, then give your bottom extra loving care. If you had stitches they will dissolve by themselves in 10-14 days. 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.

The day after birth you can start your herbal baths. Baths promote healing by increasing circulation and relieving soreness. The herbs are anti-bacterial, tissue-regenerating, and have gentle anesthetic properties.

Other techniques that speed healing and provide relief are: the dry heat of a hairdryer on your bottom (set on low or cool, good after using the bathroom or bathing); leaving your bottom open to air (sitting on towels or chucks); herbal compresses or ice packs inside your pad, sitting on a nursing pillow or donut ring.

### **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 secrete antibodies just to meet the baby's needs and if you wash them too much, you are washing away free health care. They also secrete their own lubricant which keeps nipples supple, so don't use soap on your breasts, because you will be washing away protection. If your nipples get sore you can use pure lanolin or *Soothies* for relief. (Note: For severe cracked breasts, *Soothies* can harbor infection so use sparingly and/or change out for new ones frequently.) Air and sunlight are also good for nipples. Many women find going without a bra and shirt makes the early days of breastfeeding easier, besides affording all that skin-to-skin opportunity for your infant. Remember that you need even more fluids and calories while nursing than you did in pregnancy!

I recommend wearing no bra until your milk comes in at the very least, for the first week if possible. If and when you start wearing a bra, keep the flaps of your bra down until the nipple is dry after each nursing. How long your milk takes to come in will depend a lot on your own comfort and how much sleep you get, so prioritize your basic needs and sleeping when your baby sleeps.

After your milk comes in, your body will need about 24-48 hours to adjust your milk supply to your baby's demand. During this time your breasts may feel hot, hard, and painful. Let your baby nurse on demand and avoid all other stimulation to your breasts, including the spray of water in the shower. Massage or pump only as necessary to soften your breasts in order to get the baby latched. Pump after a feeding if your baby doesn't empty your breasts sufficiently for comfort. In between feedings, put cold washcloths or ice packs on your breasts to slow down milk over-drive. If your baby is unable to latch or you are unable to empty your breasts please call me and/or a lactation consultant without delay.

Your body will need 1-2 weeks to fine-tune milk supply and demand, so even when everything seems right on track, stay vigilant regarding reddened or painful areas in your breasts and meeting your own nutritional and sleep needs.

## **NOURISHMENT**

You will urinate and perspire a lot in the first week or so after the birth. This is your body's way of getting rid of the extra fluid you needed in the 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 Recharge, herbal teas (traditional medicinals makes "Mother's Milk" tea, available at most grocery stores), and lemon water. Eat nutrient-dense foods that are high in iron and protein to help you heal and build your milk supply. If you had been taking extra iron, continue taking it for a month or so postpartum. Also continue your prenatal vitamin the entire time you are nursing.

## **THAT FIRST BM**

As with the whole process of pregnancy and birth, nature has built-in protectants. Your first BM is usually delayed and softer than normal. 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 flax 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 flax tea. Put 1 teaspoon of ground flax seeds in a cup and add boiling water. Cover and let sit for 20 to 30 minutes. It will be somewhat creamy and has a mild taste. It is a very effective stool softener.

## **HEMORRHOIDS**

A hemorrhoid is a swollen vein in the rectum. They are quite common after childbirth and can be very painful. There are a host of remedies to try. Everyone finds different degrees of relief with various remedies. Try any of these:

- Tucks pads and/or ice and/or pressure packs for pain relief and swelling
- Elevate the hips 15 minutes two times a day
- Gently tuck the hemorrhoid back inside the rectum with a lubricated finger
- Calendula tea or tincture internally; calendula herb, cream, or oil externally or in the bath
- Throw 2-4 cups of the pre-made herbal tea into the bath and soak in the tub for 15 minutes twice a day
- When the herbs run out, make more tea from witch hazel and comfrey by putting 4 oz of each herb in one half gallon boiling water. Let steep at least 2 hours. Strain. Pour a quart into your bath and sit in it for 15 minutes twice a day.

The hemorrhoids will disappear more quickly if you can prevent constipation by drinking plenty of fluids and eating roughage (nuts, popcorn, bran, flax, oats, dried fruit). Always go to the bathroom when you get the urge and avoid standing, lifting, straining or prolonged sitting on the toilet.

## **TAKE TIME TO REST**

Try to look at resting and napping as a priority rather than an indulgence. 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. Having some little snacks and drinks in sippy cups will help eliminate the need for you to be jumping up supplying things. If you don't take time now to rest and heal you may pay for it later in longer bleeding, breast infections, or getting sick easily.

Traditional cultures around the world set aside a specific time period – usually 15-40 days – after a woman gives birth for her to rest, be mothered, and get to know her baby. Wait until bleeding has stopped to resume heavy chores like scrubbing, grocery shopping, and vacuuming. Limit visitors to short visits at first 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 and baby. Playing hostess is exhausting, and your baby will not be a newborn for long, so guard these precious days of exploration and discovery.

## **EMOTIONS**

The birth of a baby brings an end to a previous identity and family and brings about the beginning of a new identity and family. For many women this is an emotional time. It is common to feel as if you're on an emotional roller coaster. The joy of the new baby combined with rapidly changing hormones and fatigue can be overwhelming. It is good to cry if you feel like it. Normal postpartum "blues" last about one week or so and are helped by plenty of rest. If you suffer depression that doesn't improve, please let me know so I can help you get and delegate support.

If your birth was a long or difficult one you may feel sadness, confusion, or even grief. Even the "easiest" births usually do not meet all your expectations or visions. Please openly discuss questions or issues with me. You may be processing new emotions and thoughts daily, as your baby changes and adapts daily. Whether this is your first or fourth child, a whole new family is being born – mobilize the "village" as you need it!

## **THE CHANGING POSTPARTUM BODY**

Immediately after birth, your belly still looks as though you are 5 months pregnant and feels like jello. 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. Just nursing will use 1,000 calories a day more than you normally use and 500 more 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.

Daily activities around the house with your baby in a sling or going for walks with your baby outside are wonderful ways to integrate exercise and regain abdominal tone. Hold off on jogging or aerobics until your bleeding has stopped and your cervix is closed (usually 3-6 weeks).

You can start doing kegels right after the birth. While these muscles are stretched out it will be tricky at first. But stick with it. Try ten to twenty every time you nurse. It is a good idea to do some kegels every day to restore urethral and vaginal tone.

While nursing, most women have ravenous appetites. You may find yourself even hungrier when your baby is having growth spurts. Trust your body. The demands of nursing and caring for an infant will gradually take off your extra weight. Most women lose it all between 6 to 12 months, and studies have found that women who breastfeed their infants lose weight in the thighs and buttocks, while those who bottle-feed really struggle to lose in these areas.

## **SEX**

You will hear conflicting information about the right time to resume sex. Whenever it feels right is right! Many women find sex is better after childbirth. Take extra care about lubrication, because breastfeeding makes the vagina drier. The most important thing is honest communication between the two of you. A new mother may be feeling tired, over-touched, or unsure of how her body feels and looks. A new father may be tired from picking up the slack

around the house or feeling a little left out of the intimate breastfeeding experience. Be sensitive to one another and focus on how the birth and baby have added new dimensions to your relationship.

The return of fertility is as individual as each woman. Total breastfeeding (no pacifiers or bottles) can hold off ovulation in some women until weaning, but some breastfeeding women begin ovulating again at 4 weeks, even with exclusive breastfeeding! Remember that you will ovulate before you get your period, therefore you cannot be sure whether or not you are fertile after about 4-6 weeks postpartum. If you want to be certain you don't get pregnant, use a method of protection after 4-6 weeks postpartum and enjoy your amazing body!

## **YOUR NEWBORN**

This is a lovely and fascinating time with your new little being. For those new or needing a refresher on newborn care, the following may be helpful.

- Newborns breathe irregularly, this is normal. Their breathing rate is typically between 40-60 breaths/minute, however if they are at rest you may note it a bit lower or just finished expressing themselves with a strong cry, you may note it above 60 for a short period of time. Signs of respiratory distress include flaring of the nostrils, visualizing their intercostals (ribs) muscles while they are breathing and a deep grunt with inhalation. Contact your midwife and seek care if you note any of these signs.
- You may note that your newborn has blue hands or feet. This is called acrocyanosis. This is normal in the first few days. It is an indicator that your newborn's circulatory system is prioritizing his or her organs and not extremities. Their core, chest and abdomen, as well as lips should be pink. If you note these to be blue, seek care immediately.
- Your newborn will have at least one meconium diaper in the first 24 hours. Olive oil on their bum can make for easier clean up. Meconium will change over the next few days to a lighter brown and eventually yellow seedy stool as your newborn begins to drink your mature breastmilk. Each child is different when it comes to bowel habits. Some newborns have dirty diapers with each feed and others have a dirty diaper every other day. You will come to know your child. Ask your midwife if you have questions or concerns.
- Your newborn will also have at least one void, or wet diaper, in the first 24 hours. Your newborn will increase the amount of wet diapers over the first week to 7-10 voids/day. This will continue for the first couple months of life.
- You can continue to apply goldenseal to the umbilical cord stump as needed with diaper changes. Try and keep the cord out of the diaper to avoid becoming moist. The cord will fall off over the next couple days to 1 week. Cords that detach early may leave a scab at the umbilicus (belly button), which may bleed with irritation. Do not hesitate to apply goldenseal to this area. It will heal well.
- Bathing your newborn – are newborns really dirty? Breathe deeply with your nose to your newborn's head. You may find you do not want to rid your newborn of that smell. A wash cloth to your newborns neck folds may be helpful as milk can slip in there and sour. Other than this and normal diaper care, your newborn should not need a bath. However, if you feel this to be helpful, use warm water and mild soap without fragrance if you must. Keep in mind your newborn's skin is 10 times thinner than ours and will absorb anything put on it.