

Week by Week Postpartum Healing Timeline

WEEK 1

Your vagina and entire pelvic region will be uncomfortable, swollen, and possibly, abraded. If you had a c-section, you are also recovering from major surgery. All of your organs need to shift back into place, your hormone levels are changing rapidly, and your body is preparing (and learning) to breastfeed.

Your breasts will begin to fill with milk. This will happen whether you plan to breastfeed or not—initial milk production is based on the decline of the hormone progesterone after your placenta is delivered.

In the first week or so, you can expect to experience some heavy postpartum bleeding, including the passage of large blood clots. This is the case whether you delivered vaginally or by c-section. Your vaginal discharge (called lochia) isn't just blood; it also consists of the mucous membrane that lined your uterus during pregnancy. Expect to wear pads for a few weeks. Do not use tampons during this period as they can cause infection.

Afterbirth pains can be very painful (and often get worse with subsequent births). But they actually have a very good purpose—to shrink your uterus back down to its normal, pre-pregnancy size.

Whether or not you experienced vaginal or perineum tearing or an incision (from an episiotomy), this area is going to feel engorged. You may also feel sore, stinging sensations if you have any broken skin, as well as general achiness.

The first bowel movement is uncomfortable, but avoiding it increases the risk of hemorrhoids.

The body experiences rapid hormonal shifts right after you give birth, which can make you feel extra weepy, moody, elated, and/or irritable. Know that postpartum depression is common and be on the lookout for its symptoms, including excessive worrying about the baby, a lack of interest in the baby, feeling overly sad, restless, guilty, or worthless, and/or having trouble sleeping, focusing, remembering, or eating. Check-in with your doctor if you feel you excessively blue or have any concerns about your emotional well-being.

1

WEEK 2

You are probably still experiencing vaginal bleeding, but it shouldn't be very heavy at this point. It's normal for bleeding to last (and taper out) during this second week. You may notice that some of the vaginal discharge is pinkish-brown or yellowish in color; this is also normal. You may experience vaginal bleeding and discharge (consistently or on and off) for up to 4 to 6 weeks postpartum.

By now, you are less likely to experience acute pain or stinging, though you may still feel some residual soreness. If you had a vaginal tear or episiotomy, you may be experiencing itching as your skin heals. If you had a cesarean section, you may still be feeling tenderness at your incision and under doctor's orders to take things easy, you are past the most painful and uncomfortable stage of recovery and should be feeling a bit better. As your incision site continues to heal, make sure to properly clean it.

Your incision site may feel itchy or numb.

About a third of all birthing people experience night sweats or hot flashes in the first month postpartum. This is due to hormonal shifts as well as your body's need to shed excess pregnancy fluids. You may still be noticing the baby blues. If they are becoming concerning you may want to reach out to your provider about perinatal mood and anxiety disorders.

2

WEEKS 3-6

You may be starting to feel a bit more and more like yourself at this point, which is awesome. You're likely exhausted from caring for your newborn but are starting to get on a schedule.

Remember that you are still recovering and most likely haven't gotten the "OK" from your healthcare provider for more strenuous activities yet.

Postpartum bleeding should be very light now and will end during this phase. If it comes back or if you are bleeding heavily, you should contact your healthcare provider. Making sure to rest and not exert yourself too heavily will keep the bleeding to a minimum and help you heal faster.

Your hormone levels are going through a huge adjustment, as is your body and lifestyle. If you are struggling emotionally, seek help by talking to your doctor, family, and friends.

3-6

BEYOND 6 WEEKS

At about 6 weeks, you will likely have your postpartum check-up with your healthcare provider. They will verify that any vaginal tears or c-section scars are healing properly and ensure that your uterus has shrunk down to its pre-pregnancy size. Your doctor will also do an overall health assessment. If all is well, you will be given the green-light for exercise and sex (though it's very normal to want to take things slow in both of these areas). Your check-up is a great time to discuss any other concerns you have with your doctor.

During the first few months postpartum, you will likely notice some strange things happening in the hair department, namely that your hair has thinned or has even started to fall out. It might seem strange, but it's totally normal. Here's why: The hormones of pregnancy caused your hair to be thicker and fuller. Once those hormones leveled out, your body naturally sheds the excess hair.

Post-delivery, many people experience urinary incontinence to some degree—from occasional leaking (often with sneezing, yelling, laughing, or straining) to having "to go" much more frequently. This is due to the normal stretching and weakening of the pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy and delivery. Additionally, having an episiotomy or tearing during delivery (especially 3rd- and 4th-degree perineum tears) can contribute to both urinary and fecal incontinence. Fecal incontinence (difficulty controlling bowel movements or gas) can also be a postpartum challenge. Physical therapy can be a great option!

If you aren't breastfeeding, you should get your first post-delivery period within the first 6 to 12 weeks postpartum. Most breastfeeding people will find that their postpartum period is delayed, sometimes for months longer.

Although most people are cleared for sexual activity by 6 weeks postpartum, not everyone feels ready at that point. This is perfectly normal, after all, you are probably exhausted, possibly covered in spit-up, and may just generally not feel "in the mood" quite yet.

Give it time, and concentrate on other ways of connecting with your partner until you are ready for sex. If vaginal discomfort is persistent at this point, bring up your concerns with your healthcare provider.

If you were an avid exerciser before having kids, you may be itching to get back into your old routine. But even once you are cleared for exercise, remember to take things slow.

If sadness continues bring up PMADs with your provider. You should be screened routinely even if you are showing no signs of PMADs.

6+