

Life After Birth

How you look

Although you'll be looking and feeling loads thinner than before, don't expect to be able to slip back into your skin-tight jeans just yet. It can take a while for your figure to return to something like its pre-pregnancy shape – some women manage it in a few weeks, but for many it can take months.

Lochia

This is the period-like discharge you get after the birth. It can last weeks (or months) and goes through a range of colours from red to pinky-brown, to cream before stopping. If your loss is getting heavier each day rather than lighter, you are passing clots, have a smelly discharge or tummy pains, contact your midwife or GP immediately.

Stitches and bruising

Your bottom is likely to be the most painful area after the birth – especially if you've had stitches. If sitting is painful ask your midwife for advice and try using a cooling gel pack for comfort, or regularly sitting in a shallow amount of warm bathwater. Most stitches will dissolve in around two weeks, so keep the area clean and dry to make the healing process quicker.

After pains

You may feel cramp-type pains as your uterus gradually returns to its normal size. These can often be stronger when you're breastfeeding as this helps stimulate the uterus to contract. These pains can be more uncomfortable for second-time mums.

Breasts

Immediately after the birth your breasts will start to produce colostrum – a thick, yellowish liquid, rich in nutrients and antibodies, which is perfect for your baby's first food. Your proper milk supply will start to come in around day three or four– you won't miss it, as you'll notice your boobs getting swollen and tender. (They feel like you have cannonballs inside and they are very, very hard and they hurt like hell – savoy cabbage leaves fresh from the fridge are cooling for during the day and a very good support bra to wear at night will help) If your breasts become hot, red and sore you may have mastitis – a form of inflammation that sometimes occurs during breastfeeding – and you will need to seek advice from your GP or midwife.

Baby blues

You're likely to feel a real mix of emotions in the days after the birth – joy at seeing your baby, relief you're no longer pregnant and fear about how you'll cope with motherhood. To add to the

fun, your hormone levels, which were at an all-time high in pregnancy, suddenly crash. Nicknamed the 'baby blues', this feeling usually arrives at the same time as your breast milk and can make you feel miserable, anxious and tearful. (Be prepared to cry at any time of the day, I know, I've just had my third baby) Most people usually find that they feel better within a short period of time, but if your low mood persists or worsens make sure you talk about how you feel with your GP or health visitor.

Your postnatal check

Six to eight weeks after the birth you will be checked by your GP or midwife to make sure you're feeling all right physically and your body is returning to normal after the birth. Your GP will ask you if you have any discharge, check to see if your stitches or tears are healing well, take your blood pressure and may feel your tummy to make sure your uterus has returned to its normal size. If you're due a smear test one will be arranged for you. This is a good opportunity to talk about any problems you have had during your pregnancy, labour and afterwards, and to get advice on contraception.

Ready for sex?

In general terms it is usually safe to start having sex once you've had your postnatal check and your doctor has told you that everything is healing properly. However, a combination of breast feeding, sleepless nights and feeling sore can make sex an extremely unattractive prospect for a while, so don't worry if you feel that way – you're perfectly normal. You should find your sex drive will return in a few months, so in the meantime tell your partner how you are feeling so you don't feel under pressure.

When you do feel ready to have sex – take it easy at first, and as hormone changes and breastfeeding can lead to vaginal dryness you may find you need the help of a lubricant, like KY-jelly. You will also need to take precautions, even if you are breastfeeding and your periods haven't returned to normal, unless you want to become pregnant again.

If you had a Caesarean section

If you had a C-section be prepared for your recovery time to be slower, after all, you've had major surgery. The first four or five days in hospital can be tough, but once you're up and about you'll find that you feel much more human again. Make sure you take it easy when you get home and do things gradually, and try to get your partner or friend to help you for the next three or four weeks.