
First weeks after birth

Summary

- If possible, arrange for help around the house in those first weeks after you return home with a newborn.
 - A maternal and child health nurse will contact you in the first week to arrange a home visit.
 - As your body mends, you will feel stronger and a healthy diet, gentle exercise and some time to yourself as a regular break will help your recovery.
 - Common issues after birth for mothers include bleeding, cramps, sore breasts or nipples and urination or bowel incontinence.
 - Plan ahead for contraception, even in the early weeks, to lower the chance of another pregnancy.
 - Contact your doctor or visit the emergency department if you or your baby show symptoms that don't seem typical for the first few weeks after birth.
 - If you are worried that you or your partner might have postnatal depression, talk to your doctor or maternal and child health nurse, or call the PANDA helpline on 1300 726 306.
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The first weeks at home with a newborn baby are different for every family. Your baby will change and grow from day to day. Your body will still be recovering from the physical demands of birth. As you get used to being a new parent, you will adjust to new routines and gain confidence.

Use help and advice from family, friends and healthcare services to stay healthy, happy and well supported during the first few weeks after childbirth.

Settling your baby at home

Whether you had your baby at hospital or at home, arranging for someone to help around the house for the first few days can make a big difference. This is especially true if you have:

- had a caesarean section or a complicated birth
- other young children who need your attention
- a baby discharged from a special care unit or with special needs
- limited support from extended family or a partner.

Keep a list of phone numbers nearby so you can call for help. Include contact details for your doctor, the hospital and a parent helpline.

Maternal and child health services

The maternal and child health service is a free service available to all Victorian families with children under six years of age. A maternal and child health nurse will contact you to arrange the first visit. This is usually at your home in the week following birth.

For more information see the [Maternal and child health services](#) fact sheet.

Postnatal checks

It is a good idea to have a postnatal check at about six to eight weeks with your GP. This is a good time to discuss any concerns you have about your recovery or your baby's development. It is also the time at which your baby is due for their two month vaccinations – you might find it convenient to arrange for your baby to have these while you are visiting your doctor.

Registration, payments and paperwork

When a baby arrives, you will need to let different organisations know that you have a new member of your family, including the Family Assistance Office, Medicare and your health insurer (if relevant).

Birth registration

When you have your baby, the hospital or midwife will give you a Birth Registration Statement form. This must be completed and sent to the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages within 60 days of your child's birth. You will then receive a birth certificate.

For more information, visit the [BDM website](#) or call 1300 369 367.

Medicare and immunisations

It is important to register your baby with Medicare as soon as possible after birth. Registering your child with Medicare automatically registers your baby on the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register. You will receive reminder notices when immunisations are due or overdue.

Family assistance and benefits

After your baby is born, you will be given forms from the Australian Government's Family Assistance Office that you can use to claim financial entitlements for you and your new baby. Depending on your eligibility, you may be able to claim the paid parental scheme and family tax benefits.

Childcare

Even though it may be well into the future, local government and private childcare services can have long waiting lists for a place. Ring around and find out how to add your child's name to a facility if you plan to return to work and know your return to work date.

See the [Records and paperwork for maternal care and babies](#) fact sheet.

Looking after yourself

Taking care of a newborn baby is hard work. It can be extra tricky if you are parenting on your own, if your partner works long hours or if they travel frequently. Say yes when valuable support is offered, it will give you a well-deserved break. Do not be shy about asking family, friends and healthcare services if you need more help. Try and keep your involvement in housework to a minimum as looking after yourself and your baby are more important.

Diet and exercise

As your body mends, you should gradually feel stronger, but it can take some time to feel you are back to normal energy levels. Healthy postnatal weight loss happens gradually.

Make time to eat well and get some exercise. Do some things that you enjoy, even for a short while. Local community centres and support groups can be a good source of information on healthy living and wellbeing programs and services.

See [Healthy Pregnancy](#)

Return of menstruation

If you are **breastfeeding** your baby, the time when your period returns can vary. Some women get a period within two months, others not until after six months or more. If you are not breastfeeding, your period will usually return in a few weeks.

Urinary and bowel incontinence

Issues with accidental urination or bowel motions after birth are not unusual. This will usually disappear over time. Try regular exercises to build pelvic floor muscles and you can usually start [pelvic floor exercises](#) as soon as your baby is born (unless you delivered by caesarean).

Talk to your doctor if you are still having problems after six weeks. A women's health physiotherapist or continence specialist can help with treatment.

See the [Continence information](#).

Intimacy and contraception

It is normal for new mothers to be too tired, sore and busy to think about sex or intimacy. However, over time, normal feelings will return. If the bleeding has stopped and you and your partner feel comfortable and ready for sex, you do not need to wait until the six-week postnatal check.

Although you may be breastfeeding and have not yet had your period, you can still get pregnant as early as three weeks after giving birth. Discuss the most appropriate mode of contraception with your doctor, midwife or family planning clinic if you want to avoid another pregnancy straight away.

For more information see [Sexual health – contraception choices](#).

Looking after your baby

A typical newborn baby will sleep a lot, cry to communicate and feed frequently. As you get used to their cues and signals, it will be easier to understand what they need.

Umbilical cord care

The umbilical cord will fall off your baby naturally during the first few weeks. If needed, clean the area with cotton buds and cool, boiled water. Seek medical advice if there is bleeding or if it becomes red, weeping or swollen.

Sleeping

Newborns spend a lot of time asleep, usually 14 to 20 hours a day. However, babies have shorter sleep cycles than adults and wake or stir about every 40 minutes. Newborns also feed frequently and wake every two to three hours to breastfeed.

Get to know your baby's tired signs. It is hard to establish a routine, but start thinking about a regular way to settle and prepare them for sleep.

Young babies are safest sleeping in the same room as their parents. Check that you have a safe sleeping environment, especially if you are sharing a bed.

For more information see the [Sleep and your baby](#) fact sheet.

Crying

Babies cry to communicate. However, long periods of crying can be confusing, frustrating and exhausting for parents. Many newborn babies will increase their crying time up until they are around six to eight weeks old. The crying usually gets less by the time they are around three months old.

If there are times when the crying is making you feel overwhelmed or angry, make sure your baby is safe and then leave the room for a short break. Do something that you find relaxing or distracting, like talking to a friend or listening to music.

Newborn feeding

As you get used to breastfeeding, you will find that your baby settles into a feed–sleep–play routine. Not all new mothers find that breastfeeding comes naturally. Get help early and often with advice from lactation consultants, breastfeeding support groups or through the hospital where you gave birth.

Mastitis is caused by a blocked milk duct leading to inflammation, or by a bacterial infection. It is a common, but painful condition. Talk to your doctor if your symptoms include sore, painful, red or hardened breasts, flu-like symptoms and a high temperature.

Reflux or regurgitation is when your baby brings up a small amount of milk after a feed. This is very common. If your baby vomits large amounts of milk or is not gaining weight, see your doctor.

For more information see the [Dealing with mastitis](#) fact sheet.

When to call for help

Contact a doctor if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- sudden and excessive blood loss
- persistent increased blood loss
- significant faintness, dizziness, palpitations or rapid pulse

- fever above 38°C (100.4°F)
- abdominal pain and foul-smelling vaginal discharge
- headaches with changes in vision, nausea or vomiting
- calf pain, redness or swelling
- shortness of breath or chest pain
- red, sore or hot-to-touch breasts
- cracked or bleeding nipples
- painful urination, loss of urinary control or a sudden urge to pee
- new and increasing pain in the vaginal area or in your belly
- depression, hallucinations, suicidal thoughts or thoughts of causing harm to your baby.

If your baby is unwell, or you are worried about a health problem, take your baby to your doctor or the nearest hospital emergency department as quickly as possible. The condition of a newborn baby can change very quickly.

Call triple zero (000) if it is an emergency.

Postnatal depression

After having a baby, up to 80 per cent of women may develop the 'baby blues' between day three and day ten after the birth. This feeling passes in a day or two and is different to postnatal depression (PND).

Postnatal depression is a depression that comes on within 12 months of having a baby, usually in the first few weeks or months. It can be mild or severe, and can start gradually or suddenly.

Symptoms of PND include:

- low self-esteem
- feelings of inadequacy and guilt
- feeling overwhelmed
- negative thoughts
- tearfulness and irritability
- difficulty sleeping or changes in sleeping patterns
- low sex drive
- anxiety, panic attacks or heart palpitations
- loss of appetite
- difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- fear of being alone, or becoming withdrawn.

If you are worried that what you are feeling is PND, talk to your partner, your doctor or your maternal and child health nurse. You can also call the Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA) helpline on 1300 726 306 (Monday to Friday, 10 am to 5 pm).

Finding support

Your maternal and child health service will connect you with a mother's group and local support groups. Sharing your feelings and experience with other parents can be really helpful. Some local councils organise classes for new parents such as baby massage or sleep settling techniques that you might find helpful.

Parenting helplines and your GP can also help if you have questions about your baby or your own health during the first weeks at home.

For telephone support and information, call:

- ParentLine telephone helpline on 13 22 89 (8 am to midnight, seven days a week)
- Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Line on 13 22 29 (24 hours per day, seven days a week).

Where to get help

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

- Your GP
- Midwife
- Maternal child health nurse
- **ParentLine**, Tel. 13 22 89
- **Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Line**, Tel. 13 22 29

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