

Road to recovery

You're home from hospital, happy and proud – but also exhausted and sore. Here's how to get back on your feet after childbirth, one step at a time



Those early days as a new mum are exciting and awe-filled and, for many women, overwhelming and bewildering. Psychologist Justine Adler, a specialist in postnatal depression, says this time of significant change is also a period of feeling physically exhausted and experiencing other consequences from childbirth.

"At the same time, you have a little baby completely relying on you," Justine says. From birth until the end of baby's third month is often called the 'fourth trimester' – a good indicator of how dependent a newborn can be. "The baby needs constant comfort and will not be in any type of routine," says Justine. "But with maturity the unsettled period will pass."

Your body will take time to recover, so it's important that while looking after your baby, you also take good care of yourself. Try these ways to speed up the process and help you stay strong.

1 PUT YOURSELF FIRST

Everyone will want to meet the new addition, but try to keep visitors to family only for a couple of days. In many non-Western cultures, a new mother is put in seclusion for some time and supported by others who care for her baby – a good reminder to new mums not to overdo visitors or outings.

As well, breastfeeding can take up to six weeks to establish, so try to reduce stress as much as possible. "Feeling relaxed and without additional pressures is essential at this time," Justine says.

Many women find asking for help unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but remember the saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. This will give mothers permission to get the appropriate support, Justine says. "In our culture, there is unnecessary pressure to have a new baby, a neat and tidy home and to be well put together, too," she says. "Focus on looking after yourself and make bub's needs a priority."

2 TAKE TIME TO HEAL

About half of women who've given birth vaginally will need stitches, and it's normal for new mums to feel sore. However, the stitches dissolve, so they won't need to be taken out, and soon you'll forget they are there.

To help you through this time, make going to the toilet less painful by drinking plenty of water and keeping up your fibre intake, so bowel movements are soft. Painkillers are also helpful and, as they can be anti-inflammatory, they assist in healing. Pelvic floor exercises will also increase blood flow to the area to aid recovery. Keep the area clean and dry, wear cotton underwear and change your maternity pad regularly.

3 STEAL SLEEP

You won't have made it through pregnancy without at least one person warning you about how little sleep you'll get as a new mum. In reality, you just need to adopt a new approach.

Sleep when your baby naps in the daytime – it's classic advice, but important to heed. You'll feel more energised, which will help you cope with the demands of each day.

4 EMBRACE YOUR EMOTIONS

You may have been unbelievably happy since having your baby, but chances are, two to five days after giving birth, you'll have a mini-meltdown. Justine says the 'baby blues' can occur in 50% to 80% of women, who find that usually on the third day or sometime in the first week, they experience mood swings, are more tearful and anxious, and have difficulty sleeping.

"This emotional intensity is seen as related to all the physical and other challenges of the pregnancy, labour and delivery, as well as all the birth-related rapid hormonal changes," says Justine.

"If you don't feel better after the first week or two, and any of the above symptoms deteriorate, consult your GP.

Postnatal depression can occur in one of seven mothers in Australia, yet it can be treated effectively," she says.

5 DON'T BATTLE THE BULGE

Pictures of celebrity mums with tiny waists can give women false hope for their post-birth appearance. And it's not helpful for new mums to think they will fit into their skinny jeans right away.

"Until the uterus contracts back at six weeks, it's quite okay to have a tummy," Justine says. "Often abdominal muscles separate and muscles around the stomach stretch during pregnancy." Talk to your doctor before resuming exercise, she advises, and note production of breastmilk may be inhibited by exercise.

Breastfeeding and sensible eating can help your body resume its pre-pregnancy shape, but now is not the time to focus your energy on toning your tum. **R&B**

THANKS, BABY!

How becoming a mum changes you for the better

- Baby brain? Forget it!
- Having a baby actually improves your memory, according to US researchers.
- Motherhood makes you even better at multitasking.
- A UK survey has found that while women are great multitaskers, those with kids are almost 'supermums'.
- Despite sleepless nights and endless nappies, parents are happier than non-parents.
- Experts claim people with a baby are more positive than childless couples.
- Mums of twins can expect a longer life – a retrospective US study found mothers of twins lived up to 7.6% longer than mums of singletons.

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