



Information for post-natal women

The first year after childbirth is a time of great change in a woman's life. Sex is just one aspect that may change. This pamphlet aims to give women and their partners an insight into sexuality and sensuality after the birth of a baby.

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Feeling sexual again

It can be hard to get in touch with your feelings about your body and your sensuality after the birth of a baby.

Women often say things like:

- *"my body looks awful after the pregnancy and birth"*
- *"the stretch marks are ugly"*
- *"my breasts are sagging"*
- *"my vagina has changed a lot"*

These are just some examples of the way society's expectations influence how women feel about their bodies.

It is important for you to regain a sense of yourself. Exhaustion and lack of time may make this difficult. But there are things you can do to make friends with your new body and reclaim your sexuality.

*"Sexuality encompasses more than intercourse. Sexuality is really how we feel about our whole being. Individuals are sexual beings from birth, negotiating their way through a sexual learning process which is continuous and constantly changing to suit the demands of the life cycle."*¹

All women experience their sexuality differently, depending on their situation and if they are married, single or in a lesbian relationship. You might also need to react to different cultural expectations relating to sexuality.

When to have sex

Every woman is different and there is a wide variation in how soon after childbirth women want to have sex again. No one response is 'normal'.

Some women feel a flood of vitality which they long to express sexually even in the first few days after delivery. Most women will start to have sex again about six or eight weeks after delivery. But many women will not want to have sex until three months or more after giving birth. And some women will not feel like having sex again until they have finished breast-feeding.

Your partner may assume that you can start to have sex again straight away. And magazines tend to paint a picture of what you should do, saying that you are not normal unless you have sex a certain number of times a week.

But in fact it is common for women to enjoy less sex, less often, during pregnancy and for up to one year after delivery.

Make sex more fun

Pregnancy and childbirth often stretch the pelvic floor muscles. This can make your vagina feel different. Pelvic floor exercises will help to improve your vagina's muscle tone, making sex (and masturbation) more pleasurable. These are simple easy exercises that you can do anywhere, anytime (see the box on the following page).

Lubricants help too

Many women worry that sex might hurt, especially after tearing or an episiotomy (being cut during delivery). If you're worried, start off slowly and stop if it hurts. Use lubricants like KY jelly or Sylk and try different positions to ease any discomfort.

Try relaxation and massage to stop you feeling tense. Making sure you are fully aroused before sex will also help. Calendula ointment and Scarless Healer (available from health food stores) will help heal the episiotomy scar.

Pelvic floor exercises

You can do this exercise anytime, anywhere and no-one can see you doing it! It's also very easy to do. Try doing your exercises when you are sitting feeding baby, or watching television. Be sure to do the exercise at least once every day.

To do the exercise, squeeze your pelvic floor muscles and hold them contracted for about 5 seconds. Relax the muscle, then repeat the contraction 5 times. As your muscles get stronger, repeat the contractions 10 and then 15 times each day.

It might feel hard at first. But like any exercise, it gets easier the more you do it, as your muscles get stronger.

Your pelvic floor muscles are the muscles you contract if you need to stop your flow of urine. You can also feel them working if you insert your finger in your vagina and squeeze.

Breast feeding

Some (though not all) women find breast feeding is very pleasurable. Successful, unhurried breast feeding can enable you to get in touch with your body and your sexuality in a new way.

When you are feeding, you release hormones which make your uterus contract. You may release milk when aroused, which some women may find embarrassing.

Breast feeding may lead to a dry vagina, again because of the changes in the hormones. Using a lubricant and making sure you are aroused before penetration will usually help with dryness.

Partners may say that they feel your breasts are "*not mine anymore*" and "*they are just for the baby*".

If your partner feels jealous of your attention to the baby, you should discuss this together.

Dealing with fatigue

*"Sheer exhaustion plays a part in the new parents' sex lives. Babies tend to wake up at inconvenient times. In attempting to meet the needs of a small baby, daily activities need to change and you may discover that the time, the partner and feelings of sexual arousal never seem to coincide."*²

Women who have just had a baby often say things like:

"We had put the baby down for a sleep and had just had a warm bath together. It was a wonderful feeling spending time alone. The baby woke up and started crying and I felt immediately that the moment had gone."

But remember that intimacy doesn't always have to result in sex. Learn to enjoy the moments of intimacy that you have together for their own sake.

*Remember
that sharing
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moment
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*Talk with
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partner
about what
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and need*



The emotional rollercoaster

Postnatal women may encounter a minefield of hidden feelings and emotions. Many women are absorbed in the baby or adjusting to their new role as a mother.

Your partner may see you as a mother figure, and you may both have emotional responses to the birth. You may be feeling the physical satisfaction of nursing and cuddling your baby.

"Worrying about not being glamorous and about losing your partner, feeling guilty about giving your baby undivided attention and not eating adequately are all stresses you could do without."³

If a woman feels less sexual desire after the birth of a baby, this does not mean that anything is wrong. It may be a temporary shift of energy towards protecting and nurturing a tiny baby.

One in five women may have post-natal distress after childbirth, which can also make you more likely to lose your desire for sex.

Your next pregnancy

You may also feel anxious about becoming pregnant again. Between 10 and 20 per cent of breast-feeding women do still ovulate and could conceive within 12 weeks of giving birth.

If appropriate, you should talk about contraception soon after giving birth. For some women, reducing the risk of an unplanned pregnancy can make sexual activity more enjoyable.

Talk with your partner about what you want and need. Knowing what is normal in your relationship and feeling OK about yourself is crucial to developing and enjoying your sexuality and sensuality.

Researched and written by Jo Perks and Michaela O'Brien for the LWCHC. We thank the women who took part in our discussions on post-natal sexuality at Early Childhood Centres in Sydney.

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1 Teaching about sex, W McCarthy, Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd

2 Women's experience of sex, S Kitzinger, Penguin Books, UK

3 Surviving motherhood, M Comport, Ashgrove Press, New York

Further reading:

1 Sex and intimacy after childbirth, M Snellen, Text Publishing, Melbourne



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