

# Emergency Caesarean Section: A Complete Guide for Expectant Parents

## Highlights

A caesarean section (C-section) is an operation to give birth to your baby through a cut in your abdomen (tummy).

An emergency caesarean section may be recommended if there is a concern for your health or your baby's health.

You are usually awake during an emergency caesarean section; however, sometimes general anaesthesia will be used.

If you are awake during your operation, you will be able to have a support person in the operating theatre with you.

After having a caesarean section you may still be able to have a vaginal birth in the future.

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## What is an emergency caesarean?

A caesarean section (C-section) is a surgical procedure in which a baby is delivered through an incision made in the abdomen and uterus. An emergency caesarean is performed when the birth must happen quickly, either due to complications with the mother's health, the baby's health, or labor that is not progressing normally. These caesareans can be urgent, and the operation may need to be done immediately, even if labor has already started. It may be the safest option if you or your baby are at risk.

## **Why might I need an emergency caesarean?**

An emergency caesarean might be necessary due to several factors that pose risks to either the mother or the baby. These include:

Concerns for the mother's health, such as severe bleeding or pre-eclampsia.

Concerns for the baby's health, such as fetal distress or an abnormal presentation.

Labor that is not progressing as expected, such as failure to dilate or the baby not moving down the birth canal.

Life-threatening emergencies for either the mother or the baby, requiring immediate intervention.

The decision for an emergency caesarean is often made when a vaginal birth is not safe for either the mother or the baby.

## **What should I expect if I need an emergency C-section?**

If you require an emergency C-section, the doctor will explain why it is necessary and discuss the potential risks involved. You will be asked to sign a consent form for the surgery. If the situation is extremely urgent and there is no time for written consent, verbal consent may be requested instead.

The key is that the decision is made in the best interest of both you and your baby. It's important to communicate with your doctor, asking any questions to ensure that you are fully informed about the procedure and what is happening.

## **How is an emergency caesarean different from a planned one?**

A planned (or elective) caesarean section is scheduled in advance, often when there is a medical reason preventing a vaginal birth or if the mother prefers a caesarean. It generally takes place before labor begins.

On the other hand, an emergency caesarean happens unexpectedly during labor or if complications arise. The urgency of the procedure can vary, but it is always done to protect the health and safety of both mother and baby.

## **How quickly will the caesarean be performed?**

The speed at which the emergency C-section is performed depends on the severity of the situation. There are four categories used to prioritize emergency C-sections based on urgency:

Category 1: Urgent threat to the life of the mother or baby. These caesareans are performed as quickly as possible, typically within 30 minutes of the decision.

Category 2: Problems affecting the mother's or baby's health, but not immediately life-threatening. These caesareans are typically performed within an hour of the decision.

Category 3: The baby needs to be born earlier than expected, but there is no immediate threat. These are scheduled according to available operating room time.

Category 4: The operation is planned at a time that suits both the mother and the medical team, with no immediate health risks.

If multiple emergencies occur, the hospital team will prioritize surgeries based on the level of risk, which could mean waiting if your situation is less critical.

## **What happens during an emergency caesarean?**

During an emergency caesarean, you will typically be in the operating room for at least an hour. However, it may take longer before you and your baby are back in the maternity ward.

In an emergency, there may not be enough time to administer an epidural or spinal block, and you may require a general anaesthetic, which means you will be asleep during the birth. If you receive a general anaesthetic, you won't be aware of the procedure or feel any pain.

If you don't need a general anaesthetic, your partner or support person can usually be with you in the operating room to offer emotional support. A midwife will typically stay with you during the surgery and in the recovery room, helping to care for you and your baby.

## **Can I have a support person with me during the procedure?**

Usually, one support person, such as your partner, can accompany you in the operating room. This person will provide emotional support and assist with communication between you and the medical team.

However, if a general anaesthetic is required, your support person will not be allowed in the operating room since you will be unconscious during the procedure.

## **What happens to my baby during a caesarean?**

Once your baby is born, the doctor will pass them to a midwife or paediatrician who will dry the baby off and check for any immediate medical needs. If the baby is well, you may be able to have skin-to-skin contact with your baby while still on the operating table. This can help regulate the baby's temperature and promote bonding.

If your baby is having difficulty breathing or requires immediate medical attention, the paediatrician will tend to the baby in the operating room.

## **Emotional support after an emergency caesarean**

It's natural to feel a wide range of emotions after an emergency C-section. Some parents feel relief or joy, while others may experience fear, shock, or confusion, especially if the caesarean was unexpected. It's also common to feel overwhelmed or disconnected from the experience.

Emergency caesareans can be traumatic for both parents and support people. If you find that the experience is difficult to process, it is important to seek support. You may:

Talk to a midwife or healthcare professional about your feelings.

Speak with your doctor or maternal health nurse if you're struggling emotionally.

Ask for help from friends or family who can provide emotional and practical support.

If the caesarean experience was particularly traumatic, it's possible to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or postnatal depression. If you are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or depressed, it's important to seek help as soon as possible. Your healthcare provider can guide you to appropriate support services, including therapy or medication.

## **How to address concerns about your healthcare**

If you are unhappy with your care or the way your emergency caesarean was handled, it's important to address your concerns. Start by speaking with the healthcare team who was involved in your care. Hospitals have processes in place to handle complaints and will often try to resolve any issues directly with you.

If your concerns are not addressed to your satisfaction, you may choose to file a formal complaint with the relevant healthcare authority in your area. It's important to understand your rights as a patient and how to escalate your concerns if necessary.

## **Tools and Assistance**

Recovering from an emergency caesarean can be physically and emotionally demanding, and you don't have to manage it alone. Here are some forms of assistance and tools that may help:

**Practical help:** Family and friends can assist with meals, household tasks, or caring for older children while you rest and recover.

**Midwives and nurses:** They can support you in the hospital with wound care, breastfeeding, and emotional support.

**Physiotherapists:** They may help with exercises to support healing and regain abdominal strength after surgery.

**Lactation consultants:** If you're having trouble breastfeeding post-surgery, a consultant can help with positioning and technique.

**Mental health professionals:** If you feel overwhelmed, anxious, or are experiencing symptoms of postnatal depression or PTSD, a psychologist or counsellor can provide valuable support.

**Peer support groups:** Speaking with other parents who've had similar experiences can help you feel less alone and more understood.

