

Recovery After a Caesarean Section: What to Expect and How to Care for Yourself



Highlights

Recovery after a caesarean section usually takes longer than after a vaginal birth.

You can generally do skin-to-skin with your baby during your caesarean and breastfeed soon after.

The typical hospital stay after a caesarean is 3 to 5 days.

Watch for signs of infection when you go home and see your doctor if you have any concerns or symptoms.

Support from friends, family, and professionals is available while you recover.

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Immediate Post-Operative Care

After a caesarean section, your medical team will monitor you closely in the recovery room until you're stable and ready to be transferred to the postnatal ward. They'll check your vaginal bleeding and assess your pain levels.

If you're awake, you'll usually have the chance to see and hold your baby right after the surgery. If you had a general anaesthetic, once you wake up, you'll be able to begin skin-to-skin contact with your baby and may even start breastfeeding, depending on your recovery.

Skin-to-skin contact benefits both you and your baby, helping with bonding and improving breastfeeding success. If you're unable to hold your baby right away, your partner or support person can do so. A midwife will assist in helping you position your baby to breastfeed comfortably.

In some cases, your baby may need additional care, like being transferred to a newborn care nursery if they have breathing difficulties after the caesarean.

Duration of Hospital Recovery

Typically, the hospital stay after a caesarean is 3 to 5 days. During this time, you'll experience some pain, which is normal. It's important to manage this pain to aid in your recovery. If you're in pain, let your midwife know and they'll guide you on pain relief options.

You'll remain in bed until the effects of the epidural or spinal anaesthetic wear off. During this time, you can do breathing and leg exercises to help with circulation. Once you can walk independently, the intravenous drip and bladder catheter are usually removed, which typically happens within the first 1 to 2 days. Your midwife will assist you with your first shower after the procedure.

To reduce the risk of complications like chest infections or blood clots, it's essential to get up and walk gently every day. A physiotherapist may help with exercises to strengthen your muscles. However, make sure to take it easy and follow your healthcare team's instructions.

Breastfeeding After a Caesarean

Yes, you can generally begin breastfeeding soon after a caesarean section. There may be a slight delay in milk production, but it's usually temporary. If breastfeeding is delayed, your midwife can help with expressing colostrum (the first milk) to provide essential nutrients for your baby.

Ask your midwife to help you find a comfortable position when breastfeeding. It might be easier to:

Use a pillow on your lap to protect your wound.

Lie on your side while breastfeeding.

Hold your baby under your arm with their feet facing your back.

These positions can help minimize pressure on your incision and improve comfort.

At-Home Care and Recovery Tips

General self-care

Once home, rest is essential. Try to get as much sleep as possible and eat nutritious meals to support your recovery. Avoid lifting anything heavier than your baby in the first few weeks. When you're ready, start with short walks and gradually increase the duration as you regain strength.

Keep your wound clean and dry, and wear loose clothing to avoid irritation. Watch for any signs of infection, such as redness, swelling, or discharge around the incision site. If staples were used to close your wound, they'll usually be removed about 7 days after surgery. If dissolvable stitches were used, they will be absorbed by your body naturally.

Continue taking any prescribed pain relief as directed by your healthcare team. If you have any questions or need advice, reach out to your doctor, midwife, or pharmacist.

Support at home

Taking care of your newborn can be challenging, especially early on after a caesarean. Avoid heavy chores and strenuous activities. Light tasks like washing dishes or tidying up are okay, but anything more strenuous should be avoided.

It's important to ask for help from family and friends. They can assist with meal preparation, cleaning, and caring for other children during your recovery.

Emotional Support and Wellbeing

After a caesarean, it's normal to experience a variety of emotions. You might feel happy, overwhelmed, disappointed, or even upset, especially if the caesarean was unexpected. The experience may be traumatic for some parents.

To manage your emotions:

Speak to a midwife about your feelings right after the birth.

Talk to your doctor, midwife, or maternal health nurse whenever you need support.

Reach out to family and friends for emotional and practical support.

If your experience was traumatic, it's possible to develop conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or postnatal depression. It's important to seek help as soon as you notice any negative feelings or symptoms. Your healthcare provider can guide you to appropriate support, and therapy or medication may be recommended.

Post-Operative Follow-Up Appointments

It's recommended to see your doctor for a postnatal checkup around 6 weeks after giving birth, as well as for a checkup for your baby. If you have any concerns or issues before this appointment, contact your doctor sooner.

When to Seek Medical Attention

Look out for signs of infection or complications after childbirth. Contact your doctor or midwife immediately if you notice any of the following:

Fever, chills, or sweating.

Redness, increased pain, or swelling around your wound.

Foul-smelling discharge from your wound or vagina.

Painful urination.

Heavy vaginal bleeding (soaking through a sanitary pad within an hour) or large blood clots.

A painful, red lump in your breast that doesn't improve.

Continued vaginal bleeding after 6 weeks postpartum.

Impact of Caesarean on Future Pregnancies

Complications tend to increase with each subsequent caesarean section. These can include problems with the placenta's position or detachment, and the likelihood of needing a hysterectomy increases with each caesarean, which could prevent you from having more children.

However, many women are able to have a vaginal birth after caesarean (VBAC). For some, this can be a safe and viable option. Health conditions or pregnancy complications may make a planned caesarean the safer option for future pregnancies.

It's important to discuss your options with your healthcare team early in your next pregnancy to understand the best course of action for you.

Tools and Assistance

Pain Relief GuidanceYour healthcare team will recommend pain relief options after your caesarean, including medications and alternative methods like breathing exercises or warm compresses.

Physical TherapyA physiotherapist may offer exercises to strengthen muscles and improve circulation, reducing complications like blood clots.

Breastfeeding SupportIf needed, a lactation consultant can help with breastfeeding positions and techniques, including expressing colostrum or using a pump.

Emotional SupportReach out to a healthcare provider or counselor if you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or have trouble coping emotionally after the surgery.

Home Care HelpFamily, friends, or hired assistance can help with household chores and childcare during your recovery.

Support Groups Consider joining postnatal support groups to connect with others who've had similar experiences and gain emotional and practical advice.

Follow-Up Appointments Attend postnatal checkups and consult your doctor if you notice any complications during your recovery.