

## Physical Recovery After Stillbirth or Neonatal Loss



### Highlights

Losing a baby can be devastating, and grief can have physical effects. On top of this, your body will experience changes after giving birth, such as lactation. These changes can make your grief harder to process, but there's support available to help you.

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### Physical Reactions After Loss

Dealing with a stillbirth or neonatal death is an incredibly difficult and emotional experience. The grief that follows can be overwhelming, and along with the emotional challenges, you may experience various physical effects. These reactions can include:

- Loss of appetite
- Headaches
- Tummy aches
- Insomnia \ (difficulty sleeping\)

In addition to emotional distress, your body may undergo physical changes typically seen after childbirth, such as:

- Sore breasts
- Breast milk production
- Vaginal bleeding
- Afterpains
- Weak pelvic floor muscles

These physical changes can serve as painful reminders of your loss, but there is support available to help you manage both the emotional and physical aspects of this time.

### **Managing Breast Soreness and Lactation**

From the 16th week of pregnancy, your body begins preparing to produce milk. As a result, your breasts may become:

- Larger
- Hard and sore

If you've experienced a stillbirth or neonatal death, your breasts may become engorged, meaning your body produces more milk than what is being discharged. This can lead to milk leakage for 1 to 4 days after childbirth, which can be:

- Uncomfortable
- Painful
- Distressing

## **Easing breast pain**

To help relieve the discomfort of engorged breasts, you can try the following:

- Apply cold or gel packs to your breasts
- Ask your doctor about using a mild pain reliever
- Express milk to relieve the pressure
- Wear a firm bra for added support
- Use breast pads to catch any leaking milk

## **Expressing milk**

You may choose to express your milk as you grieve your baby. You can continue to express milk for as long as necessary, but try to do so at the same time every day to help prevent mastitis.

## **Signs of mastitis**

If you develop any signs of mastitis, seek medical help immediately. Symptoms of mastitis include:

- Painful or warm breasts, possibly with a red patch
- Flu-like symptoms such as fever, body aches, or chills

If you decide to stop expressing milk, do so gradually. Reduce the number of expressions each day, allowing your milk supply to naturally decrease. This process may take a few days or weeks, depending on various factors, such as:

- How far along you were in the pregnancy
- How much milk you were expressing
- Whether you become pregnant again in the future

It's important to note that reducing your fluid intake will not reduce milk production. It's best to continue drinking water as needed.

## **Pain and Bleeding After Birth**

It's normal to experience vaginal bleeding (lochia) and pain after childbirth. These are common physical reactions following a stillbirth or neonatal death.

## **Vaginal bleeding**

Vaginal bleeding after childbirth can vary between individuals. It may last for up to 6 weeks, with different phases:

In the first few days, the blood is usually bright red and heavy, similar to a heavy menstrual period

Over time, the bleeding will become lighter and the color will change to pink or brown before it stops

You should contact your doctor or midwife if:

The amount of bleeding suddenly increases

You pass large blood clots

The bleeding turns bright red

You feel dizzy, weak, sweaty, or have trouble breathing

You experience a high fever

You are concerned about the bleeding

## **Pain**

Pain after childbirth is common, particularly if:

You experienced perineal tears during a vaginal birth

You had a caesarean section

In addition to these pains, "afterpains" may also occur. These are cramps that are especially noticeable when expressing milk.

If you are experiencing pain after your loss, consult your doctor. They may recommend various methods for pain relief, including:

Ice packs or heat packs on the painful area

Pain relief medications like paracetamol, ibuprofen, or aspirin

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug \ (NSAID\ ) gels

## **When to See Your Doctor**

After a stillbirth or neonatal death, it's important to schedule check-ups. Make an appointment with your doctor about 8 to 12 weeks after giving birth. During this visit, your doctor will:

Assess your health

Discuss any risks or considerations for future pregnancies

## **Body Image and Emotional Recovery**

The physical changes your body undergoes after a stillbirth or neonatal death can make the loss even more difficult to process. You may feel emotions such as guilt or frustration, and it's normal to feel as if your body has betrayed you. However, it's important to remember that you are not alone in this experience.

Grief is a complex and intense journey, and the loss of a child can be devastating. It's normal for some days to feel harder than others, but with time, managing your grief may become more manageable. It's essential to have support, whether from:

Family and friends

Your partner

Support groups or online forums for others who have experienced similar losses

## **Pelvic Floor Recovery**

Childbirth can stretch and weaken your pelvic floor muscles. This may lead to bladder and bowel issues such as incontinence.

A weak pelvic floor after childbirth can cause you to:

Leak urine when you cough, sneeze, laugh, or exercise

Experience difficulty controlling gas \ (farting\ )

Struggle with bowel movements \ (constipation\ )

To help your pelvic floor muscles recover, consider the following:

Avoid bouncing exercises that may strain the pelvic floor

Perform pelvic floor exercises regularly to strengthen the muscles

Squeeze and hold your pelvic floor muscles before sneezing, coughing, or lifting objects

Avoid lifting heavy objects to reduce strain on the pelvic floor

These pelvic floor issues typically improve within 6 months after giving birth.

## **Return of Menstrual Cycle**

The time it takes for your menstrual cycle to return after giving birth varies from person to person. Ovulation can occur at different times, and it's important to consider contraception if you plan to have intercourse again before trying for another pregnancy. Your doctor or midwife can offer guidance on contraception during this time.

## **Planning for Future Pregnancy**

Some parents may feel the desire to try for another baby soon after a stillbirth or neonatal death, but it's often helpful to give yourself time for both your body and emotions to heal.

Attempting another pregnancy before processing your grief can make it harder to:

Cope emotionally with another pregnancy

Bond with a new baby

It may be helpful for some people to undergo medical tests or genetic counseling before attempting to conceive again. These tests can help identify any potential underlying medical conditions that may affect future pregnancies. Your doctor can refer you to the appropriate specialist if necessary.

## **Tools And Assistance**

Seeking support during this difficult time is essential. You can speak with your doctor, midwife, or social worker to help guide you through the process

after your loss. These professionals can help you:

Learn techniques to help manage physical symptoms such as pain, lactation, or pelvic floor issues

Understand the physical changes you're experiencing

Find emotional support that matches your needs

Get advice on when and how to consider another pregnancy

Connect with local or online support groups

Access counseling or therapy if you're struggling with grief