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First days of our lives

Your newborn is here and it is an exciting and fulfilling time. Here is what to expect with the new addition

After months of preparation, your baby has finally arrived and you can now see and hold him. As you enter the confinement period, which is a period of recuperation, be mindful of the changes that may come and take this time to adjust to your newborn. Stay positive and learn to manage your expectations. If you are in doubt, do not be afraid to ask for help.

Dealing with Changes

Adapting to a new lifestyle

Having a baby will be a whole new experience for you, so be patient as you learn the ropes. Your baby will wake up for frequent feeds, so you may not be able to get eight hours of sleep at a stretch. Shorter and regular naps will help you adjust to the new schedule. Rest well and eat well, so that you can continue to give your baby plenty of quality breast milk.

Some mothers find that having a confinement nanny or an experienced

female friend or relative can help them settle in well during those crucial first weeks. Share your concerns with your husband so that he can help out whenever possible.

You would not fit into your pre-pregnancy clothes just yet

Do not be surprised or embarrassed that your belly still looks bloated after giving birth. That is perfectly normal. Breastfeeding helps the womb to contract and most mums burn off calories producing milk, thus shedding the weight.

Getting back in shape may take a few months. A sensible diet and appropriate postnatal exercises will help tone the muscles of your pelvic floor and abdomen. You will also feel more fit and energised to take care of your baby. If you had a caesarean section (C-section), ask your doctor what exercises are safe and when you can start before jumping into a strenuous workout.

**Stretch marks**

These are here to stay although they will fade from dark red to light silver and look less visible. Be proud and consider these as battle scars because you have carried and nourished your baby for nine months.

Urinary incontinence

You may leak urine when you laugh, cough or move suddenly after childbirth. Do pelvic floor exercises by squeezing the muscles as if you are trying to hold back urine. If these exercises still do not help after three months, see your doctor.

Increased vaginal discharge

After delivery, you will have lochia, a vaginal discharge, which is a mixture of blood and tissue from the lining of the uterus. It is bright red during the first few days (like a

heavy menstrual period) and tapers off to a more watery and pinkish discharge. Ten days after delivery, it appears as a small amount of white or yellow-white discharge, mostly composed of white blood cells and cells from the lining of the uterus. It may take two to four weeks before the discharge stops completely, and some women may notice intermittent spotting for a few more weeks.

Postnatal blues

Many mums, first-time or experienced, may feel exhausted from caring for their newborn. If you are feeling easily irritable, tearful, anxious or frustrated, you are experiencing postnatal blues. Postnatal blues refer to a temporary period of emotional rejection and withdrawal,

which usually occurs in the first week after delivery and may not last more than two weeks. It is due to hormonal as well as physical and emotional changes that come from taking care of the newborn. Here are some ways to cope with postnatal blues:

- **Family support.** It is natural to feel overwhelmed as parenting can be challenging. Establish open communication with family members especially when you are feeling low. Do not bottle up your feelings as suppressing them will only make you more moody and depressed. A simple hug or sign of affection will do you wonders. Remember, they are there to love and support you.



- **Organise and prioritise.** Delegate and let others in the family take over household chores, including grocery shopping and letting them take care of the newborn, so that you

do not have to manage everything by yourself and stress yourself out. Learn to prioritise by completing tasks that need immediate attention. Take one step at a time and do not set unrealistic expectations for yourself.

- **Think positive.** A positive outlook in life is another key to handling postnatal blues. Know that change is part and parcel of life and accept them. This will help to keep you in control of the situation and leave you feeling confident. Do not compare yourself to other mothers. You are unique and so is your baby.
- **Take time for yourself.** Recharge by doing things that relax you. Plan a quiet time for yourself even if it is only for 15 minutes a day, such as taking a stroll around the block or simply closing your eyes and listening to music. Or invite a friend over for a chat. Remember, when you are revitalised and relaxed, you can take better care of your newborn.
- **Join a support group.** Consider joining mothers' support groups to get to know other mums who are in a similar situation. You can learn from their experiences and exchange tips on caring for your baby as well as to alleviate stress.
- **Stay healthy.** Eat well-balanced meals. Eating well provides you with a constant flow of energy to last you through the day. Add a little exercise to your routine – short walks around the block is a good start. Also, stay smoke-free and abstain from alcohol.

Symptoms of postnatal blues can last for a few hours, or days and usually fade away without the need for treatment. However, there are instances when postnatal blues last for more than two weeks and worsen to postnatal depression. Some of the tell-tale signs of the condition include:

- Feelings of self-blame
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Thoughts of harming yourself or the baby

Should these symptoms be recognised and if you suspect that you may be suffering from postnatal depression, speak with your doctor who may recommend counselling. Refer to Page 99 for helplines.

Confinement

“Confinement” is an Asian concept observed by the Chinese (30 days after birth), Malays (44 days) and Indians (40

days) here in Singapore. The new mum is confined at home and has a strict diet aimed at boosting her milk supply as well as to help her recover from childbirth. There are taboos regarding the confinement period, including a belief that eating some foods will help with blood circulation, remove wind, and so on. But are these practices myths or are there truths in them? The answers:

Myth: You should not bathe or touch water to prevent “wind” from entering your body.

Fact: Bathing in warm water is encouraged for good personal hygiene and comfort in the hot weather.

Myth: Mother and baby must avoid breeze and the use of a fan or air-conditioner.

Fact: There is no harm in switching on the fan or air-conditioner as long as it



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makes you and your baby comfortable. On the contrary, covering yourselves in thick clothing in our climate may cause heat rash.

Myth: Every dish must be cooked with sesame oil, herbs and ginger to drive “wind” from the body.

Fact: Everything should be eaten in moderation.

Myth: A meat and liver-only diet will replenish blood.

Fact: Just having meat and liver will not allow you to meet all your nutritional needs, especially for breastfeeding mothers. Meat and liver also contain fats and cholesterol and should be consumed moderately. A well-balanced diet should also consist of food from the four food groups, i.e. rice and alternatives, meat and alternatives, fruit and vegetables.

Myth: Drinking alcohol keeps the body warm and improves blood circulation.

Fact: Alcohol may be transmitted through breast milk to your baby. It has also been shown that it prevents oxytocin release and reduces the production of breast milk. There are also adverse effects on the baby’s growth and development. Alcohol should be avoided during pregnancy, confinement and if you are breastfeeding.

Myth: Traditional recipes such as liver and spinach soup, black chicken and wine are thought to increase milk production.

Fact: There is no proven benefit that these will increase milk supply. The best way to increase milk supply is to latch your baby on when needed and to express milk regularly. Studies have shown some benefits with the use of fenugreek to aid milk production. However, this herb should be used with caution as it may have side effects. Speak with your doctor or lactation consultant if you are concerned.

Family planning

How soon should you have the next child? It depends on what you and your spouse prefer, but remember that pregnancy and childbirth can take a toll on the body. Studies have shown that when mothers conceive their second

child within six months, a greater percentage of the babies are born premature and have low-birth weight. It is best to let your body recuperate so that you can be in the best health possible for your next pregnancy.

Do not count on breastfeeding as a form of contraception. Some mums do not get their period till nine months or a year after delivery as exclusive breastfeeding will delay the menstrual cycle — the baby's suckling stimulates the hormones that suppress ovulation — but it does not mean it is foolproof. This is especially so when your baby starts to take solid food and suckles less.

Do not forget postnatal check-ups

Your doctor will usually schedule a postpartum check-up 4-6 weeks after delivery. He will check your breasts, weight and blood pressure and examine

your vagina, cervix and uterus to make sure you are healing well. A Pap smear will also be performed. It is a simple procedure to detect abnormal cell changes in the cervix.

This is a good time to talk to the doctor about your birth control preferences, breastfeeding and how you are adjusting to life with your new baby. You can also ask about exercises and steps to getting back in shape.

