

Fourth trimester

Weeks 1 to 8 after delivery

Congratulations on the birth of your baby!

You have officially entered the **fourth trimester**, which refers to the first eight weeks after your baby arrives.

While this period is no longer part of your pregnancy, it is a time of important physical recovery, emotional adjustment and bonding for you and your baby. We trust that you and your baby/ies are in good health and easing into your new life together.



What happens to your body

Your body goes through many changes as it recovers from pregnancy and childbirth. During this time, you may notice the following:

- You may urinate more frequently in the first few weeks after delivery, as your body gets rid of excess fluid.
- Your breasts will initially produce colostrum, followed by a good supply of milk once breastfeeding is established. Breastfeeding plays a vital role in supporting your baby's health by providing important immune protection and strengthening the bond between mother and baby. It is recommended to continue breastfeeding for at least six months, where possible.
- Vaginal discharge (called lochia) is normal after birth. It usually changes from red to yellow-pink, and eventually it will be colourless. Contact your doctor immediately if the bleeding remains heavy or red (bloody), has a bad odour or is accompanied by pain or fever.
- The uterus contracts and returns to its pre-pregnancy size in about eight weeks after delivery.
- Any small vaginal tears and stitches you may have had during delivery should heal completely.
- Swelling of your feet and legs should subside.
- Pregnancy-related back pain or shortness of breath should ease within six weeks after delivery.
- If you breastfeed and do some postnatal exercises, your weight should return to pre-pregnancy levels.
- If you had diabetes or pre-eclampsia during pregnancy, it is important to arrange a follow-up visit with your doctor within the first two weeks after delivery.
- Mood changes are common. Please refer to the sections on *baby blues* and *postnatal depression* for more information.
- Sexual relations may take some time to return to normal. It is recommended that you abstain from sexual intercourse for six weeks after delivery. Discuss this with your sexual partner.



Your six-week postnatal check-up

You should book a postnatal visit with your doctor around six weeks after delivery to ensure that your recovery is progressing well. During this visit, your doctor may:

- Check that your blood pressure, blood concentration (haemoglobin) and other parameters have returned to normal
- Examine you to ensure your uterus is returning to its normal size
- Check for any signs of infection in the uterus or birth canal

If you have not had a Pap smear in the last two years, it is advisable to get a Pap smear at this visit.

What's happening with your baby?

- Some newborns develop jaundice (yellowing of the skin) in the first few days after birth. If you notice this, report it to your doctor for further assessment.
- Within two weeks of delivery, your baby should steadily gain weight, feed well and sleep for long periods throughout the day and night.

If you have any concerns about your baby's wellbeing, please consult your doctor.



Immunisations

Directly after birth the baby is given vitamin K, a BCG injection (to protect against TB) and, sometimes, a hepatitis B vaccine. Further scheduling of immunisations can be discussed with your doctor at the baby's six-week visit.

Your fourth trimester to-do list

- Continue taking multivitamins prescribed by your doctor
- Discuss contraception options with your doctor
- Begin postnatal exercises when advised to regain your pre-pregnancy figure and fitness
- Continue to eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet
- Keep important telephone numbers handy, including that of your doctor
- Most importantly, enjoy this special time bonding with your baby

Baby blues

After having a baby, many women experience emotional changes. You may feel happy one minute, and start crying the next. You may feel a little depressed, have difficulty concentrating, lose your appetite or find that you cannot sleep well, even when the baby is asleep. These symptoms often start about three to four days after delivery and may last several days. This is called the 'baby blues'.

The 'baby blues' are considered a normal part of early motherhood and usually settle within 10 days after delivery. However, some women have worse or longer-lasting symptoms. This is called postnatal depression.

Understanding postnatal depression

Postnatal depression is a health condition, like diabetes or heart disease. It can be treated with therapy, support networks and medication, such as anti-depressants.

Here are some of the **symptoms** of **postnatal depression**:

- Loss of interest or pleasure in life
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Less energy and motivation
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Persistent sadness, tearfulness or anxiety
- Feeling worthless, hopeless or guilty
- Feeling restless or irritable
- Feeling like life is not worth living
- Having thoughts about hurting yourself or worrying about hurting your baby

Postnatal depression can develop at any time within six months of childbirth.

Please contact your doctor if you experience any of the symptoms and feel like you are not coping.



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Remember to register your baby as a dependant on the Scheme within 30 days of birth. This ensures that any medical treatment that your baby may need will be covered by the Scheme according to its benefits.

The fourth trimester is a time of adjustment, recovery and connection. Be kind to yourself, accept help when it is offered, and enjoy getting to know your new baby. We wish you and your family continued good health and happiness during this special time.

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