



# Taking Care of Yourself After your Cesarean Section (C-Section)

A Guide for patients and care partners



The Ottawa  
Hospital

## **Disclaimer**

This patient education resource is not medical advice. It shares common health facts, advice and tips. Some of the information provided in this resource may not apply to you. Please talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care team member to see if this information will work for you. They can also answer any questions or concerns that you might have.

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# Contents

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<b>Recovering after delivery</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What to expect during your recovery</b>	<b>3</b>
» Bleeding .....	3
» Pain.....	4
» Taking care of your incision/wound.....	6
» Keep your incision clean and dry.....	6
» Abdominal incisions heal gradually.....	8
» Surgical Site Infections (SSIs).....	8
<b>Postpartum (after delivery) follow-up appointment</b>	<b>10</b>
» Public health follow-up.....	10
» Signs to watch for .....	11
» When to call Obstetrical Assessment Unit?.....	12
» When to call your doctor or midwife or go to an ER? ...	13
<b>Your mental health matters</b>	<b>16</b>
» Helpful phrases to help start the conversation with your doctor or midwife.....	17
<b>Other Instructions</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>20</b>

# Recovering after delivery

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Recovery from a cesarean section usually takes around 6 weeks. These 6 weeks are an important time to allow your body to heal from the birth. Healing time depends on your individual circumstances (i.e.: ability to rest, complications from surgery, and having other young children at home). Below are some tips to help you recover:

- ✓ Resume your usual diet. Foods rich in iron (ex: meat, fish, seafood, eggs, lentils granola, and dried fruits) and fibre (ex: seeds, bran, oats, vegetables, apples, and almonds) may be helpful in your recovery.
- ✓ Keep active. Gentle exercises, such as walking, can help you to recover. It is important to keep up the same level of activity/exercises you did while in hospital. You can gradually increase your activity level as you feel comfortable.
- ✗ Avoid strenuous activity and to ask for help when lifting heavy items, including older children or car seats.

# What to expect during your recovery

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## Bleeding

After a cesarean section, you will have vaginal bleeding. This is normal bleeding from where the placenta was attached to your uterus. The placenta is an organ that gives oxygen and nutrients to your baby when you were pregnant.

- ✓ Have maternity pads or large sanitary pads ready at home.
- ✗ Avoid using tampons for the first 6 weeks after birth.
- ✓ The bleeding may be heavy during the first week (like a heavy period), and may increase with exercise, getting up in the morning, and chest/breastfeeding. You might see small blood clots on your pad.
- ✓ The bleeding should gradually decrease over the next few weeks, and you may switch to regular sanitary pads. The colour will change from red to dark red/brown. Bleeding may continue for up to 6 weeks.

## Pain

It is normal to be sore and tender at the incision for the first 1 to 2 weeks after birth. Your pain should get better with each passing day. You may also have stomach cramping feeling like period pain as your uterus recovers from pregnancy. Breast/chest feeding patients may also have nipple or breast/chest pain.

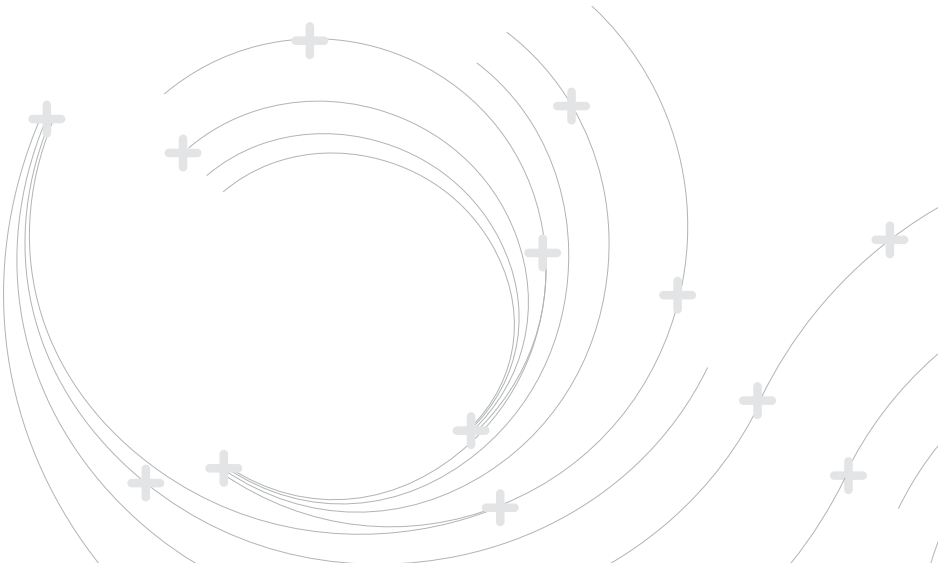
Most people need pain medication for the first couple of weeks to help manage their pain. Your health-care team will give you information about the pain medications that are right for you.

Pain medication should be taken as it is needed and as prescribed. If your pain worsens or does **not** improve, contact your health-care provider.

Until your incision is fully healed (about 6 weeks):

- ✓ Avoid straining (bearing down or pushing) during bowel movements.
  - » Take medicine like polyethylene glycol 3350 (also known as PEG 3350 or Restoralax) to help with bowel movements. Follow the directions on the package for the correct dose.
  - » The goal is to have 1 soft bowel movement each day.

- ✓ Use a pillow to support your abdomen (belly area) when standing, moving in bed, coughing, or sneezing.
- ✓ When getting out of bed, first lie on your side and push yourself into a seated position.
- ✗ Do not lift anything heavier than your baby (more than about 10 lbs or 4.5kg).
- ✗ Do not drive
  - » until you can perform quick movements (ex: stepping on the brakes without hesitation)
  - » and until you are no longer taking pain or sedating medications.



## Taking care of your incision/wound

Before leaving the hospital, ask your nurse or doctor if your incision was closed with stitches that absorb on their own or with staples that need to be removed by a health care provider.

- **If staples were used**, an appointment for staple removal will be needed. Your nurse will make an appointment with the Monarch clinic, or you can schedule an appointment with your doctor (usually 3 to 5 days after surgery).
  - » A prescription is needed for staple removal in Quebec. Let your nurse know if you are planning to have your staples removed in Quebec.

## Keep your incision clean and dry.

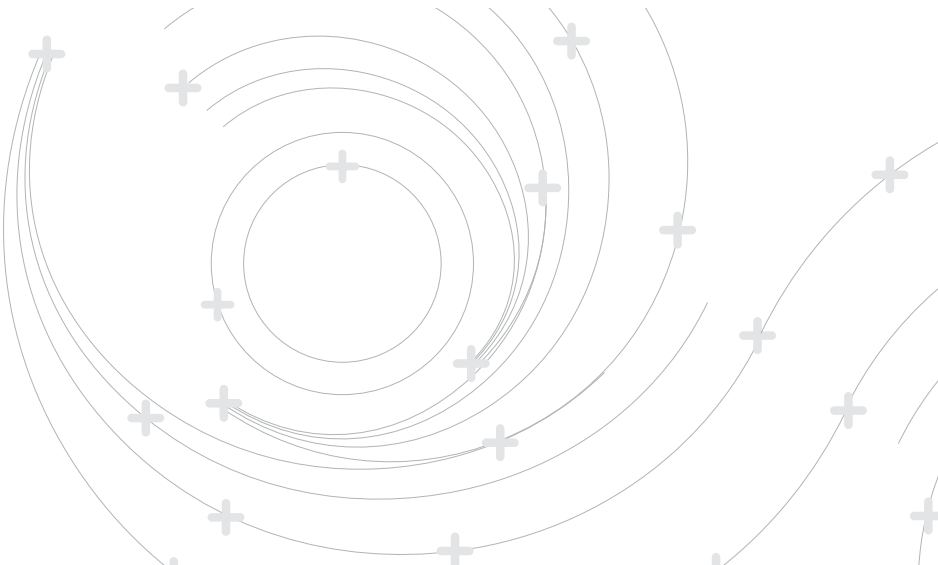
- ✓ It is encouraged to leave your incision open to-air. A dressing (bandage for your incision) is not needed after the first 24 hours.
- ✓ For comfort, you may choose to keep a loose dressing over your incision to avoid staining or rubbing against clothing.
- ✓ Wear loose fitting or high waist clothing and try to avoid underwear or clothing where the waistband has direct contact with your incision.



- ✗ Do not scrub your incision. Clean it with mild soap and water in the shower. Rinse thoroughly and make sure that it is completely dry before covering it with clothing.
- ✗ Do not soak in a bathtub, hot tub, or go swimming until your provider says it is OK to do so. This usually happens when the skin has healed, and bleeding has stopped.
- ✗ If steri-strips (small strips of tape) were used, do not remove them. They will fall off on their own after about a week.



**If your incision opens or you experience new bleeding from your incision, contact your doctor or go to the emergency department.**



## Abdominal incisions heal gradually

- In the days following your delivery, some bruising, redness and swelling around the incision is normal. As the incision heals, the swelling/bruising will resolve, and the redness will gradually fade.
- 5 to 6 weeks post birth, your incision should be closed and no longer draining.
- You may experience numbness or itching to the area even after the incision has healed.

## Surgical Site Infections (SSIs)

A surgical site infection happens when bacteria gets into your body where the doctor did your surgery. These types of infections are known as surgical site infections (SSIs). SSIs can be treated with antibiotics and can usually be treated without being admitted to the hospital.

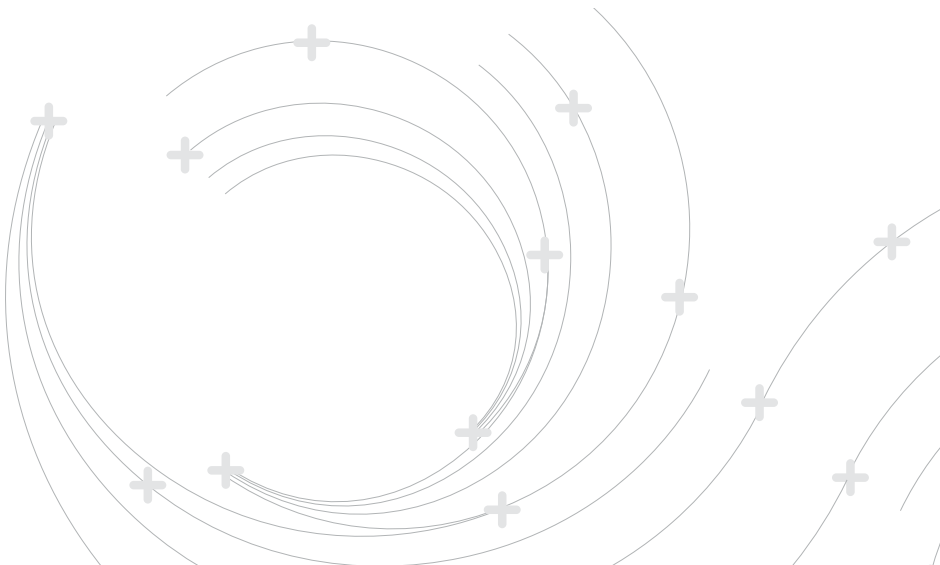
You might be more at risk of developing an infection if you smoke cigarettes, have diabetes, high blood pressure, have a high body mass index (BMI), or have a history of an SSI.

The hospital staff will do their best to prevent infection while you are in the hospital, but it is important to follow good hygiene and take care of your incision once you are home to lower your risks.



**If you develop any of the following signs of infection, contact your doctor, or go to the nearest emergency department.**

- Increased redness, swelling, warmth, and/or worsening pain at or around the incision.
- Increased amount, change in colour, or smell of fluid coming out of the incision.
- Pus (i.e.: yellow or green liquid) draining from the incision.
- Fever (a temperature of over 38°C/100.5°F), chills, and/or general unwell feeling.



# Postpartum (after delivery) follow-up appointment

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You will have a follow-up appointment with your doctor or midwife 6 weeks after your delivery. This is a good opportunity to ask any questions that you may have:

- About your surgery.
- Resuming sexual activity and family planning.
- Future birth options if you choose to have another baby.

## Public health follow-up

If you sign the "Authorization for Release of Maternal/Child Information to the City of Ottawa, Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Program" form, a nurse from Ottawa Public Health may call you about support after you go home based on your needs. You can always speak to a Public Health Nurse at a Parenting in Ottawa drop-in, located across the City, 7 days a week. For more information on drop-in availability use the Public Health QR codes located in the "More Patient Information" section of this booklet to access the websites.

If you live in Quebec, your signed authorization will be sent to the Closest Centre Local De Services Communautaires (CLSC). You will be contacted by a CLSC Nurse to plan a postnatal follow-up.

## Signs to watch for

Most people recover well after giving birth but, it's important to be aware of signs that something is not right with your healing. Anyone can develop a complication after giving birth.



### When to call 911?

Call 911 if you experience:

- Pain in your chest.
- Obstructed (blocked or difficult) breathing or shortness of breath.
- Seizures (fainting, body stiffening, and/or shaking).
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or your baby.
- An allergic reaction to medication that causes difficulty swallowing or breathing.



## When to call Obstetrical Assessment Unit?

If you have high blood pressure and/or any of the symptoms listed below, call the Obstetrical Assessment Unit:

- ☐ A headache that does not go away (often in the front of the head).
- ☐ Blurred vision or see "flashing lights"
- ☐ Heartburn or feelings of indigestion.
- ☐ Pain in the right side of your abdomen underneath the ribcage, that does not go away.
- ☐ Unexpected nausea or throwing up.

These are all signs that your blood pressure might be too high. Do not delay.

### Call the Obstetrical Assessment Unit:

- **Civic Campus** 613-761-5112 or
- **General Campus** 613-737-8012



## When to call your doctor or midwife or go to an ER?

Call your doctor or midwife or go to an ER if you have:

- ☐ A fever/temperature of 38°C (100.5°F) or higher.
- ☐ Bleeding that is very heavy (e.g., soaking through 1 pad every hour) or large blood clots (bigger than the size of a plum).
- ☐ An incision that is not healing.
- ☐ A red swollen leg, that is painful or warm to touch.
- ☐ A headache that does not get better, even after taking medication, or a bad headache with vision changes (i.e.: blurred vision, spots, or any loss of vision).
- ☐ Vaginal discharge that has a foul smell.
- ☐ Worsening vaginal tenderness.

- ☐ Difficulty with urination (peeing) or stinging that does not go away.
- ☐ A mild allergic reaction to medication, such as a rash, hives, swelling of the face or mouth.
- ☐ A painful chest/breast(s) that feels hot, tender, or red and fever and flu-like symptoms.
- ☐ Nipples that:
  - » are sore and are not getting better
  - » become reddened
  - » become shiny
  - » have small red bumps around the base
  - » are burning or itching



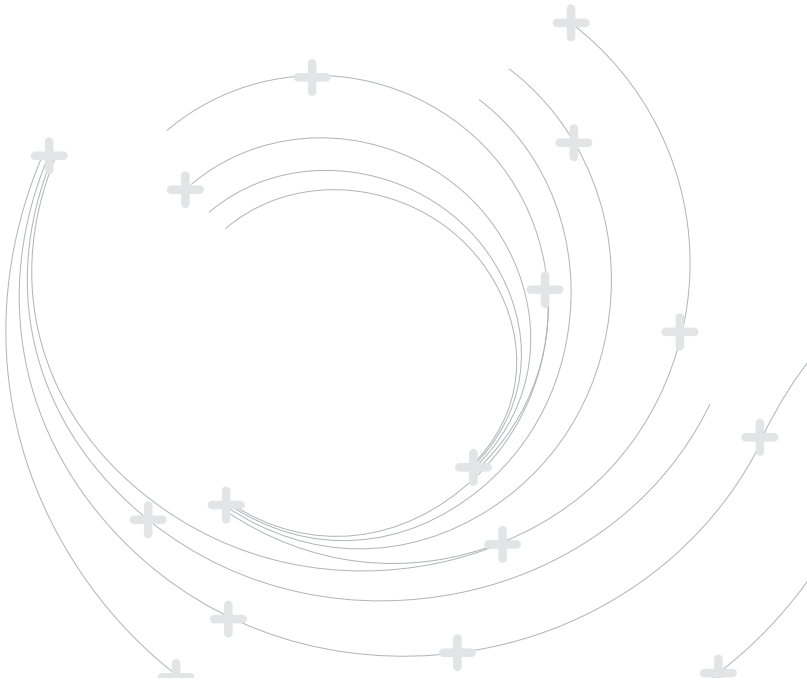
- ☐ Chest/breast pain that is shooting and goes into the armpit, shoulder or back and:
  - » occurs when milk starts to flow
  - » occurs after a period of pain-free chest/breastfeeding
  - » lasts during and between feeds
- ☐ Heartburn or feelings of indigestion.
- ☐ Pain in the right side of your abdomen (belly) underneath the ribcage, that does not go away.
- ☐ Diarrhea, that does not go away or is severe, or bloody.

# Your mental health matters

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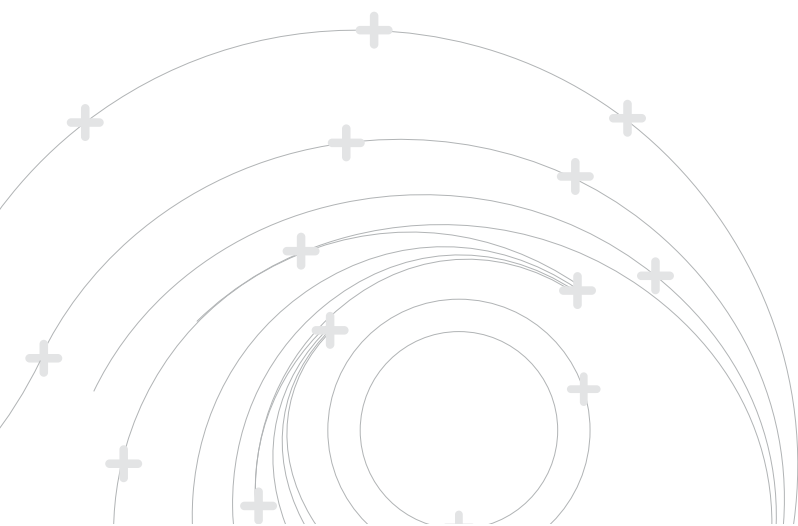
Giving birth can be overwhelming. Some people may feel tearful, exhausted, isolated, worthless, unable to cope, have difficulty sleeping, and/or have loss of appetite. If these feelings and symptoms last more than 2 weeks, they could be signs of **postpartum depression**.

Talk to your doctor or midwife about your mental health and if you are having any of the symptoms described above. Also ask them about mental health resources (i.e.: community support groups and treatments).



# Helpful phrases to help start the conversation with your doctor or midwife

- I was recently pregnant. My delivery date was \_\_\_\_\_ and I am having serious concerns about my health that I would like to talk to you about.
- I have been having \_\_\_\_\_ (symptoms) that feel like \_\_\_\_\_ (describe in detail) and have been lasting \_\_\_\_\_ (number of hours/days).
- I know my body, and this does not feel normal.



# Other Instructions

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**Last dose of pain medication given in hospital:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

**Prescription reviewed/given:**

☐ Yes   ☐ No Prescription

**Monarch Appointment:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

**Staples to be removed on (if applicable):**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Quebec Patients Only:

Prescription for staple removal given: ☐ Yes

**PICO dressing to be removed on (if applicable):**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



For more patient information please scan this QR code or visit :

### **Patient Resources from The Ottawa Hospital**

<https://www.ottawahospital.on.ca/en/clinical-services/deptpgrmcs/departments/obstetrics-gynecology-and-newborn-care/having-a-baby/patient-resources/>



### **Ottawa Public Health: Parenting in Ottawa**

<https://www.parentinginottawa.ca/en/index.aspx>



### **Ottawa Public Health: Neighbourhood Health & Wellness Hubs**

<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/neighbourhood-health-and-wellness-hubs.aspx>



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Is it welcoming and respectful of your background, culture, and identity? Your opinion is important to us. Please fill out this [survey](#) or contact the Patient Education team at [patienteducation@toh.ca](mailto:patienteducation@toh.ca)



## Do you need this information in a different format?

Please tell a member of your health-care team so that they can provide you with this information in a format that works for you. This resource is available in English and in French. Cette ressource est disponible en anglais et en français.



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