

Patient information factsheet

Blood loss – what to expect after the birth of your baby

Recovery from pregnancy and birth is different for all women. However, all women will experience some vaginal bleeding in the days and weeks after birth. It's important that you know what is normal and when you should ask for advice from your midwife or doctor.

This factsheet gives you further information about:

After pains – these are cramps or pains in the lower pelvis (area between your hips) which may occur as your womb (uterus) 'contracts' allowing it to shrink to its normal size and position.

Postnatal blood loss (lochia) – it is normal for women who have given birth (either vaginally or via caesarean section) to bleed from their womb (uterus) until the lining is renewed. The medical name for this loss of blood is 'lochia'. It is a combination of mucous, tissue and blood that is shed after birth as your womb replaces its lining.

After pains

Caused by an increase in the hormone oxytocin; after pains can vary from mild, period-type pains to something similar to labour contractions and often coincide with breastfeeding. They are less common in women who have had their first baby, tending to increase in frequency and intensity with second and subsequent births. After pains become less frequent and less uncomfortable after a few days, but can continue for about seven to ten days. You should discuss appropriate pain relief (analgesia) with your midwife.

Postnatal blood loss (lochia)

Everyone is different, however, the blood loss (lochia) can last from two to six weeks and usually varies in both colour and amount during this time.

The table on page two will give you a guide to the amount and colour of blood loss (lochia) that you can generally expect for the first six weeks after your baby's birth. If you have any concerns, you should discuss them with your midwife or GP.

You are advised to use maternity towels rather than slim absorbent sanitary towels to allow:

- your perineum (area between your vagina and anus) to heal with minimal irritation
- a more accurate assessment of your blood loss

Use of tampons should be avoided to minimise your risk of an infection.

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The table below describes the normal amount and colour of blood loss as you would see it on a standard absorbent maternity towel:

Days/weeks after the birth	Guide to colour	Guide to amount
The first day	A fresh red or brownish-red blood loss.	Quite a heavy loss, soaking a maternity sanitary towel every few hours. You may pass one or two quite large clots (the size of a tomato) or several smaller ones (about the size of a grape) during the first two to three days after the birth and have no further problems. While clots are not unusual it is essential to discuss them with your midwife (showing them to your midwife whenever possible).
Days 2-6	Your blood loss (lochia) should become either a darker brown or pinkish red in colour.	At first there will be a moderate amount of blood loss (lochia) (a 7-12cm stain on your sanitary towel). This should reduce towards day 6 (to a 5cm stain). You may also pass some very small clots (the size of your little fingernail or less) once or twice in the first 10 days. While this should not be a cause for concern, it is important to discuss them with your midwife.
Days 7-10	Staying the same colour or becoming a lighter shade of brown or pinkish red.	Getting less although still variable. For most of the time you should have less than a 7cm stain on your sanitary towel. It should not be soaked at any time.
Days 11-14	Staying the same colour or getting lighter. If you are beginning to be more active, the colour might be redder than before.	The amount will still be reducing and you may have some sanitary towels which are hardly stained.
Third and fourth weeks	If blood loss (lochia) is still present, it should be paler, possibly a creamy white colour.	Continuing to get less with longer periods of very little or no blood loss (lochia) at all. If the lochia has stopped by the second or third week and then a fresh red blood loss returns again, this could be your menstrual period re-starting (see page four). However, if you are worried, contact your GP or health visitor.
At about 6 weeks	A small or occasional loss of either brown, pinkish red or a creamy yellow coloured blood loss (lochia).	Some women continue to have a light, pale stain on their sanitary towel for several weeks; either all the time or some days only. If you have a loss that is a brighter red again, it could be your menstrual period re-starting (see page four). However, if you are worried, contact your GP or health visitor.

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The amount and colour of the blood loss (lochia) and the reduction in size of the womb after birth can be affected by:

- **The time of day** – it may be heavier in the morning or after a period of lying down as it pools in your vagina and will be passed when you stand up.
- **Breastfeeding** – if you are breastfeeding, your levels of the hormone oxytocin are increased. In addition to their role in releasing milk for your baby, these also cause your womb to contract. You may feel these contractions as after pains, but they may also be painless and only noticeable due to a slight increase in the amount of lochia, which may return to a red colour during or just after a feed.
- **Exercising** – As you increase your level of activity; for example going out for gentle walks or returning to chores such as shopping, you may experience a slightly heavier loss of lochia especially in the first two weeks. Although heavier, the colour should remain the same, either brown or pinkish rather than a bright red colour.

Reducing your risk of infection: the importance of hand hygiene

During the first weeks immediately after childbirth you are at an increased risk of getting a bacterial infection, so good hand hygiene is very important both in hospital and at home. Washing your hands before and after using the toilet/changing your sanitary towel is the simplest, cheapest and most effective way to prevent infection.

It's important to remember to:

- remove jewellery and your watch before washing your hands
- keep your nails short
- avoid touching stitches, wound dressings, drips or catheters unnecessarily

When washing your hands remember to concentrate on your:

- nail beds
- thumbs
- palms
- back of the hands
- wrists

Wash your hands for 15 seconds.

Concerns you may have

If you experience any of the following you should contact your midwife, GP or health visitor:

- **Passing large blood clots:** if you pass any large clots after the first 24 hours, or you continue to pass clots or have a much heavier blood loss than you had before, it is important to contact your midwife or GP straight away.
- **Your blood loss (lochia) is too heavy:** although variable for the first few days the amount should gradually decrease over time. If it becomes heavier than it was initially or continues as a heavy or moderate loss for longer than a week, contact your midwife or GP straight away.
- **An offensive smell:** vaginal blood loss has a very slight metallic smell however it should not be offensive in any way. If your blood loss (lochia) smells offensive this may be due to an infection either in your womb (uterus) or within your vagina or perineum (the area between your vagina and rectum) if you sustained any tears during birth. If you become aware of a change in smell, despite having recently had a bath or shower and changed your sanitary towel you should let your midwife or GP know as soon as possible. Your lochia might also have changed in colour from what you have been experiencing.

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- **Pain in your pelvis:** If you have pain in your pelvis which is not after pains it could be caused by:
 - **A urinary infection** – you should drink plenty of water and contact your midwife or GP.
 - **Constipation** – we recommend that you discuss your diet and fluids with your midwife, and ensure you drink plenty of water to avoid constipation. If you become constipated you may experience pain/cramp in your pelvis; you may also notice that your blood loss (lochia) is slightly heavier or redder in colour when you attempt to open your bowels. You might also pass small blood clots (the size of your little fingernail). A gentle laxative may be recommended if changing your diet doesn't help.
 - **An infection in the womb** – this may cause you to feel **shivery and unwell** and you should contact your GP straight away.

If you are concerned about your blood loss (lochia) and you are at home, you are advised to keep any heavily stained sanitary towels or any clots you may have passed and show them to your midwife or GP.

The return of your menstrual period

Breastfeeding delays the return of your periods after the initial postnatal blood loss has ceased. The return of your periods is likely to be between three and twelve months, however this will depend on how often you are breastfeeding and the length of time your baby is exclusively breastfed.

Further sources of information and support

This factsheet is intended to give you information and answer any of your immediate questions. Please feel free to discuss any further question and concerns with your midwife or doctor. Your GP will offer you an appointment to discuss your physical and emotional wellbeing when your baby is six weeks old.

Princess Anne Hospital, Southampton

Postnatal midwifery coordinator (8.30am to 4.30pm) **07786 266529**

Broadlands Birth Centre (out of hours) **023 8120 6012**

New Forest

Postnatal midwifery coordinator (8.30am to 4.30pm) **023 8074 7693**

New Forest Birth Centre (out of hours) **023 8074 7690**

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