

To assist you with reducing your workload and finding time for you and your partner, make the most of any offers of assistance with the housework, cooking or shopping. A couple of hours help, a cooked meal, some errands handled by another person can all bring remarkable relief. Accepting offers from people to babysit will also enable you time to recharge your batteries.

Other helpful hints:

- plan ahead for sexual activity
- feed baby first
- have a warm shower or a long bath
- take your time
- change position if you experience pain
- anticipate pleasure rather than pain
- do more activities you both find pleasurable.

Further information and assistance

**Your Child Health Nurse and Midwife**

**Your GP**

**Your Women's Health Physiotherapist**

**Your nearest Women's Health Centre**

**HealthDirect**

Freecall: 1800 022 222

**Family Planning Association of  
Western Australia (Inc.)**

(Northbridge)

Telephone: (08) 9227 6177

**Nursing Mother's Association of Australia**

Telephone: (08) 9309 5393

**Relationships Australia**

Telephone: (08) 9489 6363

Other brochures within the  
Women's Health Information Series include:

**Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises**

**Menopause**

**Osteoporosis**

**Postnatal Anxiety, Stress and Depression**

**Premenstrual Syndrome**

**Physiotherapy Before and After Childbirth**

To order any of the resources  
contact **HealthInfo** on  
**1300 135 030**

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# Sexuality AFTER YOUR BABY



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WOMEN'S HEALTH INFORMATION SERIES

# SEXUALITY AFTER YOUR BABY

Advice on a woman's sexuality after childbirth can differ. Many beliefs are based on myths, not fact.

Stories in the media often give the impression that it is easy to combine a full-time job, housework, a relationship, hobbies and other interests with your new baby. The reality is quite different.

New mothers need time for their bodies to recover and to adjust to their new self-image. It is also a time of change in your relationship and individual couples vary enormously in how they feel.

After the birth it is important for couples to talk about their feelings and their sexuality and if possible to spend time alone together. The best time to resume sex is when both are ready, considering possible hesitations after the recent birth experience.

Each woman's needs are individual. Some women prefer to be intimate by being held and cuddled rather than have intercourse during pregnancy and soon after the birth. By contrast, others may experience increased sexual interest during pregnancy.

## CHANGES TO YOUR BODY

Giving birth will also have some obvious effects on your body that can impact on your physical relationship and when you can resume sex.

The following are the most common physical changes, and where appropriate are suggested ideas to assist adjustment to the changes.

- Discharge from the uterus may continue for up to four weeks.
- Episiotomies or tears in the perineum or vagina may take between two or three weeks to heal. Caesarean section scars usually take a similar time to mend.

To reduce stress on any scar tissue during sexual intercourse, you can help guide the penis into the vagina. This is often easier if the woman is on top of her partner and will also avoid pressure on full breasts or sore nipples.

Side-to-side or rear entry positions may also be more comfortable.

If you have stitches from the delivery, check the scar before resuming sexual activity. Use a mirror to inspect the area and see if it has healed. Check for tenderness by putting some finger pressure on the scar. If this is painful, then sex will also be painful. If normal healing and sensation are not proceeding well, check with your doctor. Treatment from a women's health physiotherapist can also be effective in softening scar tissue.

A dry vagina and some tenderness and pain upon penetration can be caused by a lack of oestrogen soon after the birth especially if the mother is breastfeeding. It is important to use a water-based lubricant to reduce friction.

Vaginal slackness results from stretching the pelvic muscles during pregnancy and delivery. Pelvic exercises should be practised many times a day for at least three months to help restore the vagina's normal muscle tone. Contact your child health nurse or women's health physiotherapist at your local hospital for more information about pelvic floor exercises.

Breasts will not be as firm, whether a new mother decides to breastfeed her baby or not. The 'let-down' reflex of breastfeeding can be triggered by sexual excitement. Breastfeeding can stimulate this normal physical response in some women.

Your partners reaction to heavier breasts resulting from breastfeeding can be different. For some they are a 'turn-on', for others they discover the 'miliness' is a 'turn-off'. Every couple is different.

The waistline may not spring back instantly to its original shape. The recommended daily postnatal exercises, as described in the Physiotherapy Before and After Childbirth booklet, can help this.

Brown skin colour around the nipples and the brownish vertical tummy stripe that develops on some women during pregnancy may take four months or longer to fade. Stretch marks also fade gradually to become silvery lines.

## USING CONTRACEPTION

Returning to having sex requires decisions about contraception. Contrary to common beliefs, breastfeeding alone is not an effective form of contraception. Between ten and twenty percent of breastfeeding women can become pregnant within sixteen weeks of giving birth.

Protection from an unplanned pregnancy needs to be discussed with your doctor before the delivery or soon afterwards. Frequently, a different form of birth control may be suggested after the birth than what you may have used previously.

## RELATIONS WITH YOUR PARTNER

Your partner will also be experiencing a time of adjustment. His libido may have decreased after the baby's birth due to the increased financial and personal responsibility to the family and continuing work commitments. In other cases the male's sexual desire may seem to increase. This can be caused by jealousy of the mother's intimacy and physical closeness with the baby, a fear of being left out of the new relationship, or even feeling neglected.

During the busy weeks and months after the arrival of a new baby, it is common to feel overwhelmed by the constant demands upon your time and energy. It is important to communicate your needs to your partner, particularly if more assistance may be needed from them.

Fatigue caused by interrupted sleep and very busy days may reduce either parent's sexual interests. As well as this, babies can wake up and demand attention at the most inconvenient times.

It may also be difficult for your husband to understand that you may have had so much touching and intimate contact with the baby that you don't welcome his touch. This type of interpersonal stress can be eased with good communication.

When couples have little time to relax and enjoy each other's company, just spending a quiet time along together, talking, cuddling and kissing is important. Intimacy does not have to result in sex.