

THE 'EARLY' AFTER-DELIVERY VISIT, IMPORTANT FOR YOU AND YOUR BABY

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Most women do take good care of themselves and are diligent about their prenatal visits, however; once the baby is born they become busy with the new baby and forget to take care of themselves!

New Jersey statistics for post-delivery visits within 8 weeks of delivery reveal that almost 25% i.e. 1 in 4 women do not return for their after-delivery visit (post-partum) visit. By not going to their physician for this very important visit, they are missing out on an essential component of their continuing health maintenance and disease prevention.

It is of utmost importance for a woman to return to her physician for the early post partum visit as well as for the 6-8 week post partum visit. The reasons for this are many, but overall the good health that the woman enjoyed during pregnancy must be maintained so she can take good care of her baby. A woman's body undergoes many changes directly after delivery and these continue through the next 8 to 12 weeks, when the entire body, especially the uterus, cervix, vagina, gastrointestinal and the urinary system are returning to the normal baseline non-pregnant state. There are many components to this process. There may be many symptoms that are totally normal and many others that are signs of an impending problem and could become severe and cause much danger to the woman if ignored and not taken care of quickly. At an early post partum visit and at the later 6-8 week visit, many of these problems can be detected by a physician and proper treatment given. A woman misses out on this if she does not see her doctor for both these important visits!

During the early ~2 week after delivery visit (and also at 6-8 weeks), the doctor address the following---

1. **BREASTS** -- During the first few days after delivery, the breasts usually get engorged with milk and there may be continued milk discharge from the nipples. If a woman is breast feeding her newborn, a regular schedule of feeds helps to prevent engorgement. If the baby does not drink enough, residual milk may cause engorgement, discomfort, pain, redness and rarely infection (mastitis) if the milk glands get infected by bacteria, because milk is a very favorable medium for growth of bacteria. A woman can avoid this by regularly emptying the breasts. At the early visit the physician will enquire about breast feeding, and if the woman does not want to breast feed then will advise about measures to reduce discomfort and engorgement. The nipples will be examined to make certain that there are no cracks or soreness and also advice on how to treat these if there are cracks or soreness. If there is mastitis, then the doctor will give antibiotics, such that will not harm the baby.
2. **UTERUS and BLEEDING (LOCHIA)** -- The uterus slowly returns to its non-pregnant status within 6-8 weeks after delivery. Most of the change happens within the first two to three weeks. At this time if an infection occurs in the lining of the uterus then this process becomes abnormal and a 'puerperal endometritis' is said to have started. This infection is dangerous because the bacteria can gain access to the entire body through the blood vessels which are still open, this is called puerperal sepsis. This is a life threatening condition and was the cause of death of many women in the days when no antibiotics were available. Nowadays, because of antibiotics not many women die, but can become very sick and need to be in hospital for several days.
At the early post partum visit the physician will examine to make certain that this is not happening and that the uterus is returning to normal. If there is any suspicion of infection the doctor may give antibiotics to prevent it from worsening. If undetected and untreated, this infection can also cause severe bleeding (post partum hemorrhage) and later on persistent infection of the fallopian tubes. If the tubes get infected, they may close down due to scarring,

so the woman may become infertile (cannot have any more children). This may happen even if the infection is mild.

If a woman has a 'smelly' discharge from the vagina she must visit her doctor promptly, because this may be a sign of beginning infection.

3. **BOWEL PROBLEMS** - Normal bowel movements may take a few weeks to return to normal especially after a cesarean delivery. Constipation is very common and may aggravate existing hemorrhoids. Your physician will enquire about this problem and will advise diet and if necessary even prescribe a stool softener or laxative. You should eat a diet high in fiber e.g. oatmeal, raisin bran, beans, dried figs and apricots, and drink a lot of fluid orally.
4. **URINARY PROBLEMS** – Your doctor will make certain that you do not have any signs or symptoms of a bladder or kidney infection at your 2 weeks visit. Drink plenty of fluids, especially water, to avoid constipation and urinary infection.
5. **HEMORRHOIDS** – Hemorrhoids are common during pregnancy and become worse after delivery especially if you are constipated. Your doctor will examine you and advise on how to avoid pain and bleeding and if necessary prescribe medication for pain relief and to shrink hemorrhoids.
6. **LACERATIONS AND CESAREAN INCISION** – It is of utmost importance to make sure that the cut on your abdomen from cesarean is healing well and there is no infection. In the same way it is important to make sure that any cut or laceration that was repaired during a vaginal delivery is healing well and there is no danger of it opening up due to not healing properly. At your early 2 week post partum visit, your doctor will examine for this and will advise you how to prevent complications and problems later on in your life.
7. **POST- PARTUM DEPRESSION** – It is very normal to feel tired and lack energy a few days after delivery. This is because of the massive hormone changes that are happening after delivery. These feelings may be even more disturbing if you had a cesarean delivery or had a preterm birth or it was a difficult birth. These feelings should go away within ~2 weeks of delivery. If sadness, inability to cope, feeling overwhelmed, crying, lack of sleep, feeling 'depressed' last longer than two weeks, it could be serious and needs treatment. This is Post-Partum Depression and is a serious condition, but does have treatment if detected early. Your doctor will evaluate you for this at your 2 week visit and also at the 6 week visit and advise treatment and if necessary will refer to a specialist for treatment. Do tell your doctor how you feel, do not feel shy or embarrassed.
8. **SEX AND BIRTH CONTROL** – You should think about the type of birth control that you will use, during the last few weeks before delivery. Remember that if you are not 'completely' breast feeding, you could ovulate and become pregnant 3 to 4 weeks after delivery, even before your 6 week visit. That is why it is important to attend for your 2 week visit because your doctor will advise you about it at your 2 week visit. Most couples find it hard not to have sex for six weeks, so it may be too late to talk about birth control at your 6 week visit because you may already be pregnant!
9. **EXERCISE AND DIET** – Your doctor will advise you on the best way to get back to your normal weight quickly and on what foods to eat and what to avoid to get back to your healthy normal self as soon as possible.
10. **YOUR BABY** – Just as it is important to take care of yourself, it is important to take the baby to see the 'baby doctors' to make sure that the baby is healthy and obtain advice and help on how to take care of any problems. The baby doctors will also advise on

vaccinations against many dangerous diseases.

All the possible problems as noted at the 2 week visit will also be addressed at the later 6-8 weeks visit. To maintain your own health and to make sure that the baby is continuing to do well, please understand the importance of the early and later after-delivery (post- partum) visit. Do not miss out on your health by not going or not taking your baby to these important visits.

If you have any other concerns or questions, speak with your physician at any of these visits, or even make an additional appointment.

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