

# SEXUALITY AFTER THE BABY'S BIRTH: A COUPLE'S RELATIONSHIP



## Postpartum Parent Support Program

### Information Sheet

Canada

The birth of a baby brings celebration and change. But the new life isn't just the baby's—it's yours and your partner's too. During the first few months after birth you will learn what it means to have a baby in your life. It is often a struggle to find ways of coping with the changes that birth brings. All of these changes can affect your sexual relationship.



Many women describe the first little while after childbirth as a time when they feel *mixed up and confused*. These feelings will affect all aspects of your life, including your emotional and sexual relationship.

The *weariness* that many people experience when caring for a newborn is often overwhelming. Of all the stresses associated with having a new baby, being tired is the one most mentioned by almost all parents.

When a baby comes into a relationship, adult intimacy or conversations often come second to the baby's cry. For many couples, making the *gradual shift to parenthood* is a big challenge. Many women notice that their partner's role as a lover and companion changes to become "the other person who cares for the baby".

A particularly difficult issue is *jealousy*, or competition for affection. Often there just isn't enough energy, time and affection for everyone. Many women feel a great deal of stress that comes from balancing the roles of mother, worker and lover. Often women as mothers give a lot and ignore their own needs for adult company, nurturing, and sexuality.

#### 1. **How can we look after our relationship as a couple after the birth of our child?**

Enhancing your relationship will take commitment, mutual understanding and equal sharing. Keeping your relationship healthy may mean more care and planning than before.

*Share the responsibilities of parenthood equally.* This means that both of you need to contribute time, work and caring.

This helps to avoid feelings of anger, resentment, jealousy and a sense of being overwhelmed. Remember that it is a particular challenge for couples to stay friends and lovers as they become parents.

It is important that you *take time for yourself* to help you feel good about yourself. Do something that you enjoy: listen to music, take a bath, visit a friend... Encourage yourself by saying that you are doing the best you can.

*Communicate* with your partner. Try to communicate in a sensitive way about each other's feelings and needs. The use of "I-messages" is a good tool to keep communications open. For example: "I feel...when you..." or "I feel...when you...because..." will help promote understanding of each other's feelings.

It is important to plan for some "adult time" together in order for you to appreciate one another as lovers and friends, and not only as the parents of the new baby. This may be difficult to accomplish. Something always comes up that seems more important than special time with your partner. However, if the relationship always takes second place to your baby, or other circumstances, this could have a negative effect on you, your partner and your relationship.

### ***Precious moments***

When the baby is quiet, spend these few precious moments with your partner. Put aside housework, outside work and other chores. The quiet time may only be minutes but they are worth hours towards building and keeping your relationship healthy.

### ***Revive the romance***

Make plans for a special occasion even if it's only a half-hour with your partner in the same room uninterrupted by the baby or other children. If it does not turn out quite like you expected, remember anticipation can be very rewarding and start planning on the next 'get-away minute or hour or evening'. Romance does not have to be expensive. Express a romantic phrase, compliment your partner or play a special song for him or her.

## **2. *I am really not very interested in "sex" right now. Do others feel this way?***

Yes. Some women have little or no interest in sex for a while after childbirth. Others resume sexual activity fairly quickly. Everyone needs to do things at their own pace.

A lowered interest in sex can result from having your life shaken up, feeling exhausted, having to take care of your new baby, your partner and maybe other children. Remember, you need to be nurtured and cared for, too.

There can also be physical reasons why you are not interested in sex. Some medical procedures during birth may make you sore for several weeks. Your vagina may be dry. Lovemaking that does not involve intercourse may be just what you want.

Talk to your partner about your concerns and feelings. Perhaps you will be able to come up with some solutions.

## **3. *I do want and need love and affection, what can we do?***

There are many ways of showing love and caring in a sexual way. They are only limited by your imagination. Explore each other's fantasies through all your senses. There are many ways of getting and giving pleasure—touching, looking, teasing, kissing, massaging, licking, sucking. Share intimate quiet times together, watching sensual or romantic videos...do anything that both partners agree to. Use your needs and desires as guides to your sexual activities.

Massages, sometimes with scented oils or creams, back rubs, foot rubs, head rubs, mutual intimate touching of each other until orgasm—are wonderful expressions of lovemaking. Some couples enjoy touching and kissing each other's breasts, nipples, necks, ears as well as their genitals.

## **4. *When is it OK to start having intercourse or penetration after the baby's birth?***

Opinions still vary on the length of time a woman should wait before she puts anything in her vagina. Some suggest to wait until the first physical exam (approximately six weeks). Others suggest as soon as the bleeding has stopped (three to four weeks) and it is comfortable for the woman.

**5. What are some suggestions for the following concerns?**

*Decreased vaginal lubrication*

This is common during the first six weeks to six months because of lower levels of the hormone, estrogen. It is more common in mothers who are breastfeeding. During intercourse, putting water-soluble lubricating gel in the vagina and on the penis can help ease the insertion of the penis. Allowing sufficient time to become aroused is important, although lubricants may still be required.

*Discomfort in the genital area*

If you are having intercourse, experiment with various sexual positions to discover the most comfortable ones for you. Having intercourse with the woman on top helps her to control the depth that the penis can enter the vagina. If the vagina is tender when the penis is inserted, use lubrication and insert one or two fingers into the vagina before attempting penetration with the penis. Rotate them in order to help the muscles of the vagina relax enough to allow the penis to enter without discomfort.

If a scar causes pain, this can be decreased by a warm bath and/or the use of cream or water soluble gel.

If discomfort persists after four weeks of having intercourse, women are encouraged to consult with their physician or midwife.

**6. I am having intercourse and do not want to get pregnant. Can I get pregnant?**

Yes. Birth control is an important consideration after the baby's birth and should be discussed with your partner. The best method is the one that you as a couple will use every time you have intercourse throughout the time when no pregnancy is wanted. The various contraceptive options should be discussed with a health care professional and your partner. These include condoms in combination with foam, a sponge or vaginal films; Norplant; Depo Provera; diaphragms; and oral contraception. Breastfeeding does not prevent pregnancy.

**7. When I breastfeed, I sometimes feel aroused sexually and this makes me feel uncomfortable. Is this normal?**

Yes. Stimulation of the breasts, even by your infant, can cause sexual arousal. These feelings are usually sensual rather than sexual, although sometimes a woman may experience an orgasm while breastfeeding. This is quite normal because your body is very sensitive after childbirth and may produce sensations you have not experienced before.

**8. Where can I go for more information?**

Contact your local public health department, Planned Parenthood office, community health centre, your family physician or midwife. You can find books at your local library.

*Love, mutual respect, sharing and communication are the most important tools needed to have a positive, intimate, mutually pleasurable sexual relationship during the postpartum period and forever.*

---

*Our mission is to help the people of  
Canada maintain and improve their health.*

Health Canada

---

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, represented  
by the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2003.

*Sales and Ordering Information:*

*Telephone:* 1 800 635-7943 or (613) 941-5995

*Fax:* 1 800 565-7757 or (613) 954-5779

*E-mail:* [publications@communication.gc.ca](mailto:publications@communication.gc.ca)

*Website:* [publications.gc.ca](http://publications.gc.ca)

*By mail:* Canadian Government Publishing  
Communication Canada  
Ottawa, ON, Canada K1A 0S9

*Catalogue No.:* H39-153/23-2003E

*ISBN:* 0-660-18955-0

For more information on Health Canada, visit [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)