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Common Postpartum Complications

The postpartum period, often referred to as the “fourth trimester,” is a critical time for new parents to adjust and recover after childbirth. While many focus on caring for their newborn, it is important to be aware of postpartum complications that may arise. Recognizing the signs of these complications can help ensure a healthy transition into parenthood.

Postpartum Hemorrhage (Excessive Bleeding)

Excessive bleeding after childbirth is often caused by the uterus not contracting properly after childbirth. Can be life-threatening and is a leading cause of maternal deaths in Canada.

Seek medical attention if experiencing:

- Heavy bleeding (soaking one pad in an hour, two times in a row)
- Large blood clots (larger than an egg)
- Persistent stomach pain
- Fever (38.0°C or higher)
- Dizziness, rapid heartbeat

Postpartum Depression (PPD)

Feeling emotional or anxious (“baby blues”) is common after childbirth, but if these feelings persist, it may indicate postpartum depression (PPD). PPD is a serious condition that needs treatment. Seeking help is necessary and normal.

Seek medical attention if experiencing:

- Persistent sadness, hopelessness, extreme fatigue, uncontrollable crying, severe mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, severe anxiety, feelings of guilt or isolation
- Intense fear of harming oneself or baby

PPD is treatable, and early intervention can lead to better outcomes.

Call 911 if having thoughts of hurting oneself, the baby, or others.

Breast Pain and Engorgement

Occurs when the breasts become overly full with milk, causing swelling and discomfort. Usually occurs about 2 to 5 days after birth but can also happen if there are delayed or infrequent feedings.

Symptoms:

- Swollen, warm, hard, lumpy, and/or uncomfortable breasts

Tips for relief:

- Breastfeed or pump frequently
- Use cold compresses between feedings to reduce swelling and warm compresses before feeding to improve milk flow

Mastitis (Breast Infection)

An infection of the breast tissue caused by blocked milk ducts or bacteria entering the breast. Can occur from severe engorgement or if the baby is not latching properly.

Seek medical attention if experiencing:

- Flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever and chills)
- Redness, swelling, and pain in the breast

Treatment includes taking antibiotics and pain relief medications as directed by a healthcare provider, as well as rest and frequent breastfeeding.

Other Postpartum Infections

Infections can occur in vaginal tears, caesarean incisions, or the urinary tract after childbirth.

Seek medical attention if experiencing:

- Increasing pain, redness, swelling, unusual discharge
- Fever (38.0°C or higher)
- Painful urination or itching (vaginal infection)

To aid recovery:

- Keep wounds clean and dry
- Follow healthcare provider’s instructions
- Clean perineal stitches after using the restroom

Urinary Incontinence

Involuntary urine leakage due to weakened pelvic floor muscles. Common after childbirth, especially during physical activities like coughing, sneezing, or lifting.

Tips for management:

- Perform Kegel exercises regularly
- Use the bathroom regularly, extending intervals between bathroom breaks over time
- Stay hydrated
- Eat a high-fibre diet to avoid constipation

Seek medical attention if experiencing persistent and severe leakage that interferes with daily activities.

Perineal Tears or Episiotomy

Soreness in the perineum (area between the vagina and anus) due to tears or an episiotomy (surgical cut). May remain sore and/or swollen for several weeks.

To ease discomfort:

- Change pads every 4 hours
- Rinse perineum with warm water and take sitz baths
- Apply ice packs for 15-20 minutes at a time to reduce swelling
- Stay hydrated
- Rest and avoid strenuous activity

Seek medical attention if experiencing heavy bleeding, new or severe pain, an unusual smell, or wounds that refuse to heal.

Constipation

Painful and challenging bowel movements, caused by hormonal changes, pain medications, dehydration, and lack of sleep.

To ease discomfort:

- Drink plenty of water
- Eat fibre-rich foods
- Increase physical activity gradually

Talk to a healthcare provider about stool softeners and other medications if there is no relief.

Hemorrhoids

Swollen veins in the rectal or anal area, often caused by pressure during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as constipation.

Symptoms include pain, discomfort, itching, and bleeding during bowel movements.

To aid recovery:

- Increase water intake
- Eat fiber-rich foods
- Use cold compresses for 10 to 20 minutes several times a day to relieve swelling
- Use gentle wipes instead of toilet paper
- Avoid sitting or standing for prolonged periods

Resources and Support

If any of the symptoms discussed above occur, seeking timely medical attention is important. Early intervention can prevent further complications and improve recovery.

Remember that support is available through healthcare professionals, support groups, family, and friends. Prioritizing physical and mental health can help ensure a healthier transition into parenthood.

For immediate health advice and information in Saskatchewan, call **HealthLine** by dialing **811** or 1-877-800-0002 (provides 24/7 support, including support for mental health concerns).

In case of an emergency, call 911.

For more detailed information and related resources, visit:

<https://skprevention.ca/common-postpartum-complications/>.

Select References

Additional references available upon request.

1. Public Health Agency of Canada. (2023). Your guide to postpartum health and caring for your baby. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/child-infant-health/postpartum-health-guide.html>
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