

Will we ever have sex again?

An honest guide for new parents

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Sex is such a very small word for an activity that holds such an important place in our lives and relationships; an activity loaded with huge meaning and emotion. And we do it for many and varied reasons. Sex can be the cement that holds a couple together, a means of communicating love, commitment or gratitude, enhancing our relationships and making them richer. It provides a boost to our self esteem, offers stress relief, exercise, and relaxation, makes us feel good, is fun and of course is a method of procreation.

But, for both women and their partners alike, the idea of resuming their sex life once their baby has been born can be an area of embarrassment and frustration. Not only has the boundary of your relationship expanded to include your baby, life has also suddenly become more complicated, leaving you both feeling physically and emotionally exhausted. It may feel like you will never have sex again, but judging by the number of us who go on to have a second, third or fourth baby you probably will! So, how do you get back on track and resume sex with your partner after the birth of your baby? The short answer is by being honest about how you feel and keeping the lines of communication open and then resuming your physical relationship slowly, gently and lovingly. But, it's a bit more complicated than that...

When to have sex – the physical considerations

When you can have sex again is down to you but the physical healing process needs to be taken into account. From a physical perspective you should wait until any bleeding after the birth (lochia) has stopped, which should be about three weeks after your baby's birth. This is because the wound left in your uterus (womb) by the placenta coming out is still healing. If you have sex before the bleeding has stopped, you may get an infection.

Sex after a vaginal birth

You may be feeling sore from a tear, episiotomy or stitches. If you had a tear, or if your baby was born with instruments (e.g. forceps, ventouse), it may take you a little longer to feel like having sex again. This is perfectly normal, and you should give yourself time to recover. The soreness may go away relatively quickly, though the pain of stitches or a severe tear may take a while longer to heal. Stitches may be painful for a few days or weeks. Let the wound heal, and any stitches dissolve, before you have sex again. Even if you haven't had an episiotomy or a tear, the perineal area can feel bruised and sensitive for some time.

Sex after a Caesarean Birth

If you had a caesarean birth, you will still be recovering from a major operation. Your scar should have healed by the time your stitches come out. If it still feels sensitive, you and your partner could try to find positions that don't put pressure on the scar. Starting with foreplay will help to reduce any fear you may have of your scar being painful.

If you are anxious, your tummy will tense around your scar, and this will feel uncomfortable. You could place a small, soft cushion between your tummy and your partner. This may relax you and help to protect your sensitive scar. Or you could position yourself on top, while gently cradling your tummy. This will help to prevent the movements from making your scar uncomfortable.

Breastfeeding and Sex

If you are breastfeeding, your sexuality is likely to be affected by a number of factors, including low levels of oestrogen, which may lead to vaginal dryness, reduced desire or a less sensitive clitoris.

Another effect of breastfeeding is that levels of testosterone (the 'male' hormone that boosts libido) may also fall, and prolactin (the milk supply hormone) rises. Oxytocin (the hormone that makes your milk flow) is also released during orgasm, so your breasts may leak during sex.

For partners, bear in mind that, although mum's breasts may be larger than they were before pregnancy, they may also be far more sensitive and tender. Check with her that it's ok for you to touch them. If she is happy for you to do so, bear in mind the following:

- If you suck on her nipples, her breasts may release sweet-tasting milk – this may take you by surprise.
- You should also avoid going straight from oral sex to nipple-sucking as you may transfer the organism that causes thrush.

Baby number 2? Not for a while maybe...

You'll need to consider contraception when you do start to have sex again. Even if you are still breastfeeding and your periods haven't returned, you may still get pregnant again. That's the physical stuff out of the way but when you feel like having sex, that's a different matter.

Everyone is different. There's no norm, or set time when you should aim to have sex by. The most important thing is to wait until you are both physically and emotionally ready. Don't feel pressured to resume sexual activity and don't pressure your partner. Everybody is different and for some people it can take a long time before they feel ready. It's important to make your feelings the priority and certainly don't compare yourself to other couples – they may not be admitting their true situation anyway. If you both feel ready to have sex before your postnatal check at about six weeks after the birth, you can go ahead if you want to.

For mum: It's very common not to feel like having sex in the first few weeks or months after having a baby. For a start, you're probably feeling exhausted due to lack of sleep, not to mention overwhelmed by the demands of being a mum. Your perception of your own body may have changed. You may feel that your body is so changed by pregnancy and birth that you need time for it to recover before you feel like yourself again. Feeling low, or suffering from postnatal depression, will make you feel less like having sex. All of these feelings are understandable and normal. You may worry that your partner won't find you attractive any more. If you explain your concerns you may be surprised to find this is probably far from being the case!

For partner: It may be that you want to have sex before your partner feels ready and it is easy to feel rejected when she declines. You may feel uncertain about having sex after seeing the birth or even be unsure about your own feelings about becoming a parent and insecure in your new role. You may also be worried that sex will be painful for your partner and you may hurt her. Be understanding of the demands your baby is making on you both and talk about concerns you have. By sharing the problem, and being honest with each other, you can work through it together. Remember that there are other ways of showing affection. You can have physical closeness without full sex and it may make both of

you more comfortable that you can have a cuddle without it having to lead to anything else. Let your partner know that you still have sexual feelings for her, but that you will wait for the right time for both of you.

Ok, taking all that into account, you both feel ready and brave enough to try and have sex. How can you help to make it a pleasurable and comfortable experience? Preparation is the key:

- To combat exhaustion, accept all offers of help with your baby and the house so that you can rest. Once you're rested you may feel sexier
- Eat well, drink plenty of fluids, and rest whenever you can. Looking after a new baby is extremely demanding. To have energy left for sex, you also need to look after yourself
- Choose a time when you're least likely to be disturbed by your baby e.g. after a feed. Or try and plan some time alone together. Let a friend or relative have the baby for a while so that you can both have some alone time together
- Talk to your partner about how you feel about the changes to your body and the ways in which you might like – or not like – to be touched
- Gently explore your vagina with your fingers so that you can discover if there is any pain or change for yourself first
- Remember sex doesn't have to mean full penetration. The stimulation of touch alone can be highly pleasurable. Words and cuddles can do much to convey affection and emotion. You will both benefit from this closeness, until you are both ready to have sex again. Oral sex or mutual masturbation may be easier to begin with

And when you are ready:

- Use a lubricant (non-oil based if you are using condoms) and make sure you are fully aroused before penetration
- Try positions that limit penetration
- Take it slowly and gently

For many it's not all plain sailing. If you are experiencing physical problems with sex, causing pain and discomfort, prolonged blood loss or an unpleasant vaginal discharge, or you are just not feeling in the mood, then do seek help. It's not selfish to want a love life, even with a baby on the scene. Start slowly with cuddles, kisses and hand-holding and be honest with each other about how you are feeling. Maintaining a sense of humour also helps! Your sex life can even change for the better. If your love life or even your relationship deteriorates in the first months of being a family, it often gets better again – so keep those lines of communication open and be gentle with each other!

Further reading:

- www.babycentre.co.uk/a536362/sex-after-the-birth
- www.nct.org.uk/parenting/dad%E2%80%99s-view-sex-after-pregnancy
- www.nct.org.uk/parenting/sex-after-having-baby