

Sexual health and intimacy after childbirth

The impact
of pregnancy,
childbirth and
parenting on
sexual health
and intimacy



Introduction

Pregnancy and the birth of a baby bring about significant changes for women and their partners. Caring for a newborn infant is equivalent to taking on a new job 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The responsibilities are easier to manage when they are shared with a partner, but most mothers still do the majority of the work.

Physical recovery from pregnancy and childbirth takes time. Even six months after childbirth, many women do not feel 'back to normal' physically or emotionally.

This pamphlet is about the impact of pregnancy, childbirth and parenting on sexual health and intimacy. It has been produced by the Healthy Mothers Healthy Families Research Group at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, based on findings from the maternal health study – a longitudinal research study of over 1500 first time mothers. A sub-group of women in the study were interviewed about sexual health and intimate relationships when their first child was around 3 years old.

Women were very generous in talking frankly about their personal experiences. The pamphlet summarises some of the thoughts and feelings of women who were interviewed in their own words, and represents just some of the experiences women may have at this time.

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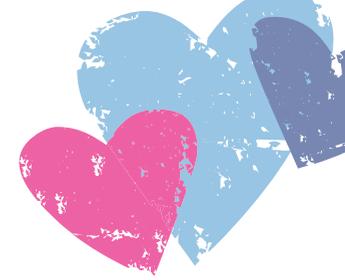
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Physical recovery after childbirth

Physical recovery from childbirth, tiredness, pain, fear of pain, breastfeeding and loss of libido have a major impact on sexual relationships after childbirth.

We tried a few times [to have sex] and just couldn't do it. Like physically couldn't do it because of pain, which really turned me off sex for a while.

It's scary! It's like you don't want anyone to go down there or touch you, 'cause you feel like it's all injured.

I'm still extremely conscious of it [pain], whenever we have sex. Even now. And it's not painful now, but I'm anxious about it.

I guess I went from having a very healthy sex-drive and a very healthy libido and interest in sex, to being completely disinterested, completely... No interest, no physical nothing. So whether that came from headspace, or whether it was a physical, hormonal thing, I don't actually know

These days I'm just so tired I feel like I could go without sex forever.

It's not really sexy, breastfeeding (laughs).

I've just had an infant kind of attached to me for two hours, I don't want any more, get away from me, kind of thing.... It kind of feels like "I don't want any more people kind of feeding off me in that sense, right at that instant".

Changing lifestyles after childbirth

Lifestyle changes associated with having a baby, loss of freedom, and loss of time together as a couple are challenges for all new parents and can be overwhelming at times.

That whole first year I really objected to a lot of what I had to give up.

I feel as though there's not enough of me to go around. Let alone my own sense of giving to myself.

I think you miss the freedom for yourself, but you miss it as a couple, a lot.

I think, just issues about the mediocrity of life when you're caring for a child...you know, essentially you're a personal carer.

And there becomes these assumed roles, and that pisses me off.... I think it just makes me more tired, and pissed off. I feel like I carry around this chip on my shoulder.

For some women, but not all, motherhood and sexuality are experienced as contradictory roles.

I suppose I've lost the confidence just knowing that I'm a mum. Maybe for me that's taken a lot of sex appeal out of me as a woman. I don't see myself as sexy anymore because I know that I'm a mum

It's kind of like a bit of a conflicting role to be a mother and a nurturer on one side, and a whore in the bedroom on the other side.

I think it's because it's harder to see myself as a sexual being, to tell you the truth.... This is me. This is what I do everyday, I look after children, I clean up, I just feel really mundane, and like, how could you find this attractive? It doesn't feel sexy.

Work's played a really big role in sort of helping me feel like a person rather than just a mother. I can go out and get all the affirmation of being in the adult world and that helps me feel good about myself, which helps me feel that I've still got something interesting to bring to the relationship.



Relationships and sex

Almost all couples have sex less often after having a baby. Some women feel this does not affect closeness with their partner. Others feel that there is less intimacy in their relationship as a result of having less sex.

I don't feel that we've grown apart because we're not having sex... We still kiss and cuddle and sit on the couch together.

Because that's gone so much [sex], a lot of the intimacy has as well. And I think that if we had more intimacy, we'd have more sex, and Marcus thinks that if we had more sex we'd have more intimacy

Some women felt that sex and intimacy with their partner had actually improved since giving birth.

But I reckon it's better now, yeah [sex life]. Than what it was.... we probably explore more.

We're having really close sex when we do have it, it feels really special. It feels like, we've got this family, and we've still got us.

My feeling has changed, you know, feeling in terms of being aroused... I seem to have found my G spot.

The birth of a baby can intensify existing stresses within intimate relationships.

I think everybody knows, if you have a child, it puts different pressures on a relationship which are really going to exacerbate whatever difficulties are there.

I just think your whole way of thinking changes when you've had a child... And I wasn't prepared to put up with what I used to put up with.

For those couples who made a smooth transition to parenthood, teamwork between partners and sharing the responsibilities and workload of parenting was seen as invaluable.

It's been a real joint venture. And I think the fact that it's [the workload] been halved, has really helped, and the fact that it's been mutual has really helped.

Throughout the whole birthing thing he was my support person and I relied on him and he knew that I was relying on him. And he stood up to the plate.

Body image

The physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth can bring about both positive and negative changes to the way women feel about their bodies.

I feel like if anything, I had more respect for myself and for the female form. I mean, it's quite a miraculous thing, and I found that empowering, rather than sort of negative.

Physically, I didn't feel attractive you know. I was just like "How could you want to have sex with me? I'm like really looking hideously ugly and my boobs are huge and leaking milk everywhere."

Connection to your newborn

The love and energy being poured into a newborn baby means that relationships and sex sometimes take a back seat.

Every ounce of my energy, my affection, my love, it was all focused on him [the baby]. And, I think that there wasn't room for anything or anybody else.

Sometimes I feel as though I'm more in love with my children. Isn't that madness?

Talking about sex and relationships

Many women wished that they had had more information to prepare them for what lay ahead.

No-one seems to care, and no-one seems to ask... sometimes you do feel like you've fallen through the gaps a little bit.

I think I was just putting on a bit of an act I guess.

There's not enough said about how your sexuality may be affected...if I'd been prepared that things could be different, then perhaps I would have coped better or taken it more in my stride.

I think just being told that this was normal... probably would have helped. And just someone to say 'Things do get better, you probably will be exhausted, and you probably will fight'... but just to know that is was normal, what was happening.



What Helped?

Here's what women had to say about what helped.

- > Talking with your partner about the changes and demands brought about by life with a new baby, and how you will deal with these demands as a couple
- > Sharing the responsibility for the emotional and physical aspects of parenting equitably (or almost equitably) with your partner
- > Getting time to yourself, away from the baby
- > Taking time out to reconnect as a couple
- > When resuming a sexual relationship, taking things slowly, and not feeling pressured to rush into it
- > Agreement between partners on whether or not sex is currently a priority
- > Knowing what's 'normal' and that what you're going through is not 'abnormal'
- > Having a trusted health professional to talk to about sex and relationships.
- > And for some women, giving priority to sex even when they were exhausted or would rather be doing something else was helpful

If you would like to talk to someone about your relationship or sex life, the following organisations may be able to help you.

Relationships Australia is a nation-wide provider of information, group courses and counselling aimed at building positive and respectful relationships.

Phone 1300 364 277 **Website** www.relationships.com.au

WIRE: Women's information provides free information, support and referrals to women across Victoria.

Phone 1300 134 130 **Website** www.wire.org.au

This booklet is based on findings from the **maternal health study** – a longitudinal study conducted by the Healthy Mothers Healthy Families Research Group at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

The Healthy Mothers Healthy Families Research Group conducts research which aims to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of poor maternal health and to contribute to policy and practice in maternity care, early postnatal and primary care services. Our work spans three major areas:

- > women's health after childbirth
- > improving maternity and postnatal care
- > Aboriginal women's and children's health.

For more information about our work please visit:

www.mcri.edu.au/healthymothers

