

A Mother's Guide to C-Section Recovery

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In the United States, as many as 1 in 4 women who give birth will do so by Caesarean Section (C-section). During this surgical procedure, an incision is made through the abdominal wall and uterus. The incision may be made across the bottom of the abdomen above the pubic area or, in a line from the navel to the pubic area. As with any major surgery, a period of recovery is expected and needed. With all the concerns of a new mother, it is easy to neglect the fact that the woman's body is not only recovering from 9 months of pregnancy, but also major abdominal surgery.

Some commonly reported problems following a C-section include:

- § Pain when coughing or taking deep breaths
- § Severe gas pains
- § Tenderness, itching, and/or numbness over the incision
- § Difficulty with certain movements, including moving around in bed, reaching overhead, and nursing
- § A feeling of pulling over the abdomen
- § Difficulties/pain with bowel and bladder

Knowing what can be expected and understanding that the recovery process after a C-section takes time is very important for the new mother and can help ease some of her anxiety.

What to Expect: In the Hospital

After a C-section, you can expect a 3-5 day stay in the hospital before going home. While in the hospital, you will be encouraged to get out of bed to walk as soon as possible, usually the day of or day after delivery. You will need assistance and you may have to work through some discomfort, but taking some steps will help keep fluids from collecting in the lungs and will increase circulation. While lying in bed, you will be encouraged to periodically wiggle your feet, rotate your ankles, and stretch your legs to prevent blood clots. Activities that put stress on the abdominal muscles, such as laughing or coughing, will probably cause discomfort. Your nurse can instruct you on how to use a pillow to put pressure over your stomach during these activities to lessen this pain.

What to Expect: Back Home

Take it easy and avoid lifting anything heavier than your baby for eight weeks. As for any new mother, accept offers from friends and family to help out with daily activities, and try to get sleep whenever possible. Gradually building up your walking endurance is a great step towards increasing your overall fitness level and will go a long way in increasing intestinal motility and even improving your mood. Initially, abdominal binders can be worn to help keep the abdominals tight to prevent pulling of the incision site.

In terms of pain relief, prescription painkillers may be used for up to a week after surgery, followed by a transition to over-the-counter pain relievers. *Remember not to take aspirin or drugs containing acetylsalicylic acid if you are breast-feeding.* It's not uncommon to have occasional pains in the surgical area during the first year after the surgery.

You will also need to monitor the healing of the incision site. It can take 4 weeks or more for a cesarean incision to heal. Once the incision site is closed, you should start using your fingers to mobilize the scar by moving your fingers against the scar grain, making a circular motion and even rubbing the area of skin around the scar with some cream to prevent adhesions from forming.

What to Expect: Getting Back in Shape

Knowing when and how to return to activity and exercise is a common concern for most mothers after a C-Section. A Physical Therapist can help identify and address many areas of need, including abdominal/trunk weakness, pelvic floor dysfunction, lifting and nursing techniques, and pain modulation via Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) Units.

Generally, you can begin gentle leg lifts and some isometric exercises around 4 weeks, depending on how you feel. It is usually recommended to avoid using free weights, bar bells, clean and jerk, and abdominal muscles for at least 4-6 weeks after delivery, and never without caregiver clearance. Moderate exercise can usually begin around 6-8 weeks with doctor approval. It will probably take several months to return to your former fitness level.

Whether your C-section is intentional or unplanned, the birth of your child can still be just as beautiful as you anticipate it to be. For more information on recovering from a C-Section, read Maureen Connolly and Dana Sullivan's book, *The Essential C-Section Guide: Pain Control, Healing at Home, Getting Your Body Back and Everything Else You Need to Know About a Cesarean Birth*, and www.storknet.com/cubbies/csections.