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Newborn baby and what to expect in the first few weeks

Having a newborn baby is an exciting and often stressful time. It is a time of great emotional and physical change both for yourself and your family. If you have had a baby before then you will have some appreciation and ideas regarding the time leading up to and after birth but each baby is different so your experience will probably vary with each baby.

The birth:

Your obstetrician may recommend a planned (elective) Cesarean section for a number of different reasons (baby is breech or not turned head down, your placenta is covering the birth canal, previous Cesarean section). You may also need an emergency Cesarean because either yours or your child's health is at risk should labour proceed. Some women can find the idea of a Cesarean section worrying but it is important to realize that it is a procedure that is only recommended when it is not safe to proceed to a vaginal birth. Most people would agree that it is most important to try our best as a team with our obstetric doctor and midwife to try to have a healthy baby. The recovery from a Cesarean section can often take a number of weeks to months so it is very important to look after yourself during this time and get some extra help to look after the baby. If you have a vaginal delivery the recovery is usually quicker but some new mums can take many weeks to feel back to normal again.

Vitamin K and hepatitis B immunisations:

In the first few hours after birth, your baby will receive a single dose of vitamin K. This injection is to prevent a rare condition called "haemorrhagic (excess bleeding) disease of the newborn". A baby gets very little vitamin K from the placenta or from breast milk. Vitamin K is very important in helping blood to clot properly. A single dose has been shown to be a safe and effective way of reducing bleeding problems after birth. I also recommend that your baby receive the hepatitis B immunization within the first few days of birth. This is a safe and important immunization that is well tolerated in newborns.

Newborn checks:

Your baby will have their weight, length and head circumference measured in the first few hours following birth. The weight will also be checked again after a few days prior to discharge. Many babies lose up to 10 % of their birth weight within the first few days after birth and if they are feeding well there is usually no concern. If they lose more than 10 % then often top up feeds of expressed

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breast milk and formula milk may be recommended. All babies born in Australia will have a special newborn examination that should be documented in your baby's green book (health record). This is to ensure that any major problems with a baby are picked up such as problems with the way your baby's heart sounds, the way the baby looks or the way the baby's hips move. However, most babies will have a normal newborn check.

Newborn screening blood test:

On around day 3 a midwife will collect a few drops of blood onto a card for the newborn screening test (NST, Guthrie). This will be collected from your baby's heel. You may want to breast or bottle feed at this time to minimize the discomfort. This card is sent to the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the blood is tested for the rare possibility of hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland), phenylketonuria (PKU, a rare metabolic condition) and cystic fibrosis (severe lung disease). There are many other extremely rare diseases that the newborn screening test checks for. Your obstetrician will be notified within 6 weeks if there is a problem with this test and if you do not hear anything by this time the NST was normal.

Hearing screening test:

All babies are eligible for the Victorian Infant Hearing Screening Program (VIHSP). This screening test will be performed on your baby prior to discharge. If the test is not normal then another test will be arranged with an audiologist (hearing specialist) after discharge.

Feeding difficulties:

Breastfeeding is the best way to feed a baby but sometimes it is not possible for all mothers to be able to offer this for their baby. Breast milk offers several benefits: improved immunity, best nutrition, and better digestion. However some women have difficulty establishing breastfeeding successfully. Your midwife will assist you in getting your baby to attach and may also need to assist you with expressing by hand or electric pump. Should you need to express at home you can hire or buy pumps from most pharmacies. Some women, despite their best efforts, are unable to breast feed and need to use formula milk. The formulas available today are safe and well balanced to provide adequate nutrition for babies' growth and development. Your breasts may take 3 to 5 days to start to make milk and sometimes longer. Babies who lose too much weight

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(greater than 10 %) because there is not enough milk can become lethargic and do not feed well so may need top ups of formula milk until the breast milk comes in. Mastitis is a common problem that can affect new mothers where the milk ducts become blocked and often infected. This condition can be managed with heat treatment, massage and pain medication but some women need to have a course of antibiotics. It is important that you continue to either feed or express during this time.

Jaundice

Over half of all newborns become jaundiced (yellowing of the skin). Your baby may need jaundice test, or an SBR blood test. This will be done to see if your baby needs to be placed under a purple ultraviolet light in order to help breakdown the yellow pigment that you may have noticed in your baby's skin and in the whites of baby's eyes. Jaundice can make babies very sleepy and reluctant to feed.

Postnatal depression and "baby blues"

There are many hormonal changes that occur around birth and many new mothers may experience this as a period of emotional instability a few days after your baby is born. For most women this feeling or "baby blues" passes quickly. Some women can experience a persistently lowered mood and feelings of being out of control and hopeless and helpless to change the situation. This often comes hand in hand with problems with feeding, settling and sleeping. Please share these feelings with your maternal child health nurse, your family doctor or make an appointment to see me. Postnatal depression affects up to 20% of new mothers and there are many ways to help.

After discharge from hospital

When you are discharged from hospital your local Maternal and Child Health Nurse (MCHN) will be informed. They will come and visit you at home in the first week after discharge to check on you and your baby. Please contact your local council if you do not hear anything about this visit within a few days of being at home. Your MCHN will arrange regular checks on your baby for the first four years of your child's life. I am happy to see you and your baby for the six week check particularly if you have any concerns or questions regarding your baby.