

a new baby? information for fathers



The birth of a baby is a very special event, not just for women, but also for men - and other family members too. It brings about major changes in the lives of everyone involved.

This leaflet is part of the PRISM Information Kit given to mothers by the maternal and child health nurse in your area. The Kit provides information about women's health after childbirth and about services and supports in the community. Your local council is taking part in the PRISM project which aims to find ways of better supporting mothers in the year after birth.

This leaflet is written for fathers because of the important role you play in your baby's life and because you are one of the best supports a mother can have as she recovers from the birth.

It gives you information about:

- some common experiences parents of new babies face
- health problems women commonly experience as they recover from the birth and the kinds of support they find helpful
- ways to be involved with and enjoy your baby.

Fathering a new baby

We don't often hear about what having a new baby is like for men. Here are some of the pleasures that men mentioned when we talked to them about writing this leaflet:

"I take the baby out so I can have a walk - and puff my chest out and feel proud."

"I never knew I liked singing till Penny came along."

"It's great when my wife goes out. That's my time with the baby. I love it!"

Having a baby brings many delights, but it may also place unexpected stresses on your relationship with your partner, change your work life forever and make getting a whole night's sleep almost impossible! Life for your partner has also dramatically changed.

Understanding women's health after the birth

(There are also two leaflets in the Kit for your partner which cover this topic in more detail)

What many women find most difficult and daunting about the first year after having a baby is the sheer volume of work involved, the constant demands on their time and energy, and the overwhelming tiredness they very often feel.

Exhaustion is an almost universal problem. One in six women experience depression. Other common health problems include:

backpain, sexual problems, pain from an episiotomy or tear, relationship difficulties, mastitis, breastfeeding problems, haemorrhoids, bowel problems, incontinence, more coughs and colds than usual.

"I don't think you can ever understand quite the difference it's going to make to your life, quite how the demands just never cease. And I don't think you can really appreciate what joy it brings to your life either."

Getting 'back to normal'

It used to be thought that women would 'get back to normal' physically and emotionally by about six weeks after the birth. For most women it actually takes quite a lot longer than this to recover from the birth. This is especially true for women who have had a caesarean section, a birth involving forceps, or a long and difficult labour.

A woman's recovery can also be affected by how the baby is. Some babies sleep less than others. Many have difficulty getting to sleep. Other babies cry a lot. This can be very draining on mothers - and fathers. And it can make getting 'back to normal' almost impossible.

Support makes a difference

Because a new baby leaves very little time for women to rest and recover after the birth, the support that partners, family and friends give women in the first few weeks and months can make a huge difference to how quickly women recover, and how well they feel in the first year after birth.

Being parents together

"For the first eight months we were just so tired. At one stage we were throwing things at each other and we've never done that before, since or at any other time."

Stresses on relationships

Becoming a family, instead of being a couple, brings lots of changes and adjustments for everyone. It's almost never plain sailing! And it's not just first time parents who may find themselves at sea - every time a new baby comes home, life changes.

Problems with sex, not having time for each other, always feeling exhausted - these are very common issues for parents of young babies. And even if you always found it easy to talk about things before, finding the energy and time now can be difficult.

We also know that women sometimes don't tell even the people closest to them about quite major problems they are dealing with.

When babies are very small, fathers can sometimes feel a bit left out. Having some time on your own with the baby - even just going out for a walk together, or taking the baby with you when you drop in on a friend - is important in developing your own relationship with the baby. At the same time your partner gets a break that's probably much needed!

Sharing the work...and the joys

Many fathers with young children have jobs that take them away from home for most of the time very small children are awake.



Being actively involved in caring for young children, especially a very new baby, can be difficult when work limits the time you are able to spend at home. And then when you do get home, it is likely to be at the very busy end of the day when children are at their crankiest and most demanding. And the mother of the baby so often seems 'to know best'.

Women often comment on how hard it is for their partners to play a role.

"It's difficult for husbands when they're at work all day. It's six o'clock - rush, bath, tea, listen to reading and go to bed ... he does as much as he can within that time limit."

Yet, it means a lot to women when their partners pitch in to get meals ready, or help with bathing and putting children to bed, giving them time for other things.

"I do ninety per cent of caring for the children, but when my husband's around, he says: 'Look, why don't I put them to bed, you sit and watch this program', or 'Finish your book'."



Time out

Having no time to yourself is one of the biggest changes for new parents. Finding some simple ways to support each other can make all the difference.

“I try to make it regularly on a Saturday morning. John is with Sarah, and I just go off and do what I feel like. I’m not usually gone long - a couple of hours or something. That’s been good. ... John sort of knows Saturday morning if I feel like it I’ll be out. So he can’t plan anything. But then he’s out all Saturday afternoon playing tennis. So that’s fair.”

Other times what mothers and fathers need most is someone to talk to. Finding a family member or friend who asks how things really are, and then takes the time to listen, can be the most helpful thing of all.

Family and friends can help too

Parents of young babies need support from family and friends too. Encouragement and practical help can make life with a new baby a good deal easier.

Yet parents often find it hard to ask for help and sometimes families or friends don’t know what to offer. Let people know what would be helpful - calling in with a meal, or taking an older child to the park, watching a sleeping baby while the parents have a bath or sleep! Sometimes it’s easier for fathers to ask for this help than it is for mothers. We often expect mothers just to cope without a break.

Things fathers can do... for themselves and their partners

Here are some suggestions from fathers themselves about being involved with your baby, as well as ways to support your partner:

- ▲ spend as much time as you can on your own with the baby from the beginning - start with small amounts of time and build your confidence (and your partner’s!)
- ▲ take the baby with you when you visit a mate
- ▲ ring another father and organise to take the babies out together one weekend
- ▲ ring from work and see if bringing dinner home would really make your partner’s day
- ▲ be the one to organise some babysitting so you and your partner can have some time together
- ▲ if sex isn’t on yet, give your partner lots of hugs, stay physically close in other ways
- ▲ make breakfast in bed for your partner (even when it isn’t Mothers’ Day)
- ▲ sleep in separate rooms sometimes, so at least one of you gets some rest - and then let the one who was up half the night, sleep-in (at least on the weekends)
- ▲ see if there are any ways you can change your work time table to fit in with your new baby: can you start later some days, come home earlier? take a day’s leave, if your partner is really tired?
- ▲ do a dirty nappy run - or find just one task around the house your partner hates, and do it, regularly
- ▲ talk about the pleasures of being a father, and the hard times: with your partner, with your workmates, with your family.



If you have any concerns about your own or your partner’s well-being, contact your local maternal and child health nurse or your doctor. Some local services for mothers (and fathers) of young babies are listed in the guide which is also part of this PRISM Information Kit.