

Bringing a little one into the world can have an impact on your body, from head to toe.

# MOTHERHOOD

HOW IT CHANGES YOU

FROM BIGGER FEET TO BELLY POOCH, CARRYING A BABY CAN LEAVE YOU WITH SOME LASTING EFFECTS. HERE'S WHAT TO EXPECT—AND HOW TO MAKE IT MORE MANAGEABLE. BY ALYSSA SHAFFER

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**YOU KNEW THINGS WOULD CHANGE** the moment you found out you were pregnant—and you expected the growing baby bump, the early pregnancy queasiness, middle-of-the-night trips to the bathroom, maybe even the swollen ankles. And sure, nobody expects to go right back to their prebaby body after birth. But you may be surprised to learn about the large number of changes that can take place once you've delivered your bundle of joy.

"Motherhood changes everything—your breasts, your body, your brain. And if you're like many women, it changes your job, your home, your car, your relationship, your finances and your shoe size—not to mention the time you wake up and go to sleep and the precious time you spend alone in the bathroom. It's all different," writes Liz Tenety, a cofounder of lifestyle brand Motherly and coauthor of *This Is Motherhood: A Motherly Collection of Reflections and Practices*.

In fact, while libraries can be filled with books about what changes during the first three trimesters of pregnancy, much less attention is actually paid to that fourth trimester—which happens after you're already dealing with lack of sleep and the constant demands of a newborn. And research shows that when moms feel like they're unprepared or have difficulty coping with the many physical and emotional changes they may be experiencing, they are more likely to feel stressed, overwhelmed or depressed.

Luckily, says Tenety, "so much of motherhood changes you for

the better. We become more compassionate to others who struggle. We find new focus and efficiency at work, pushing through deadlines during nap time. We discover deep reserves of energy after many sleepless nights. Beyond the demands and struggles, the relentlessness of it all, we find something surprising: our superpowers."

With that in mind, take a look at the many things that can occur after delivery—some temporary, others surprisingly longer lasting.

### UTERUS VAGINA AND OTHER DOWN-THERE CARES

Clearly, the place where your baby has grown from microscopic to melon size is going to take a little time to

settle back down. "Once you are full-term, your uterus expands to about the level of your rib cage," explains Tiffany Moore Simas, M.D., vice chair in the department of obstetrics and gynecology research at UMass Memorial Health Care. As soon as you've delivered your bundle of joy, the uterus shrinks to about the level of your belly button—but it takes a

full four to six weeks until it returns to its prepregnancy size. Afterpains, which feel a lot like the cramps you get with your period, begin after you deliver and last for two to three days; these contractions help your uterus start to constrict.

You can also expect a bloody discharge (known as lochia) for about six weeks after delivery; this becomes

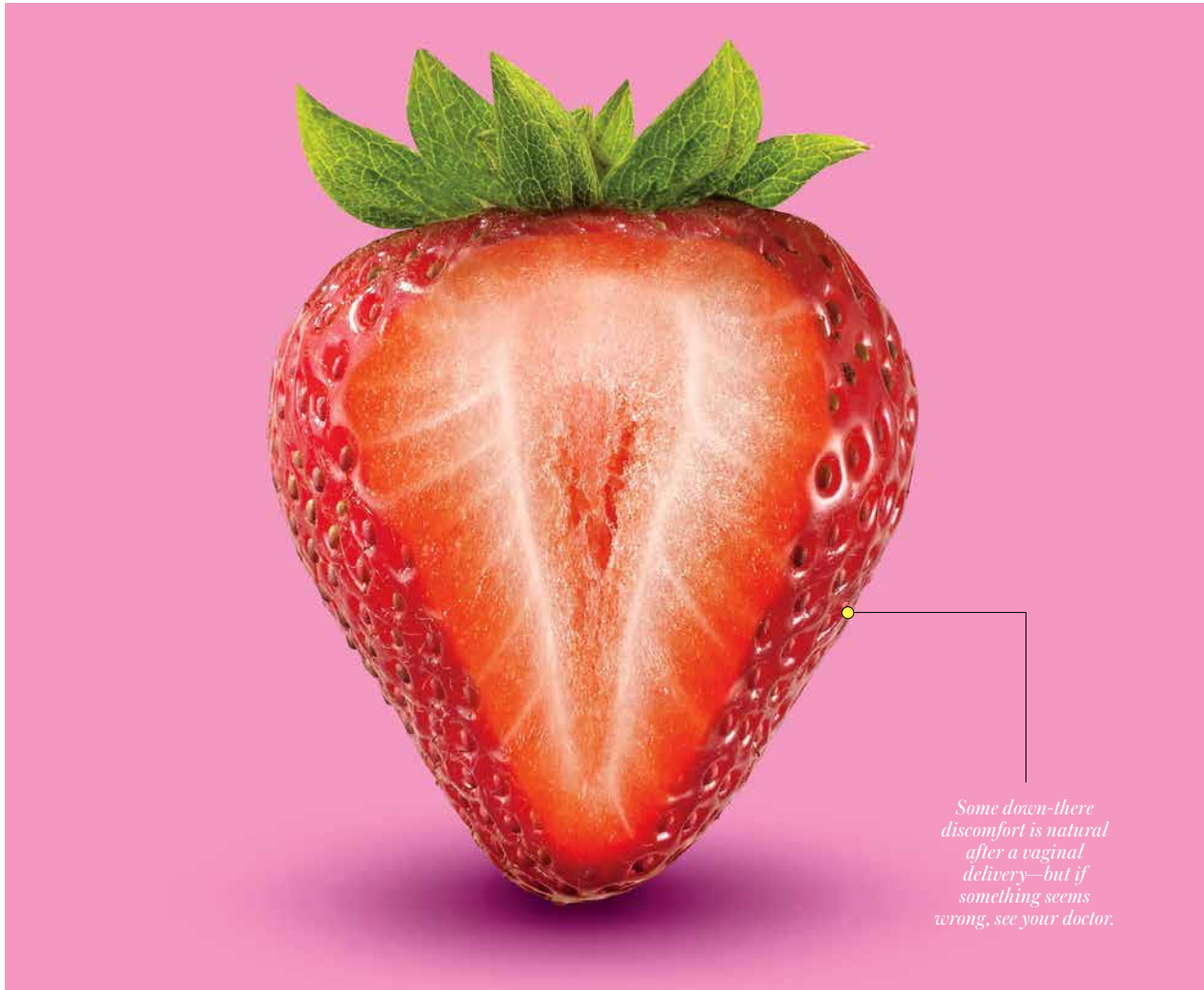
lighter in color and quantity over time. "It shouldn't be heavier than your heaviest period," explains Moore Simas. If you find yourself filling a pad an hour for at least a couple of hours, talk to your doctor about potential complications.

Those who have had a vaginal delivery will almost certainly feel sore (and swollen and bruised) for a couple of weeks. If you have stitches in the perineum (the area between the vulva and anus), you can also expect some soreness there. Ice pads, medication and sitz baths can help relieve the pain. (Sitz baths can also help reduce hemorrhoids that may have developed during all that pushing associated with labor.) This area should be healed after about six weeks, although there may be some lasting numbness, sensitivity or adhesions—some nerves may have been injured. Self-massage in this area can help increase circulation and promote healing. "Your body is pretty good at healing, and you should start to feel remarkably better in about seven to 10 days," says Moore Simas.

Once you're ready for sex, don't be surprised if you experience some vaginal dryness; the fluctuating hormones that come with pregnancy and delivery may create discomfort. Lubricants can help relieve the dryness and increase satisfaction. Talk to your doctor if you notice an increase in discharge or pain, since these can signal an infection. If you're not breastfeeding, expect your period to come back in about six to eight weeks; if you're nursing, you probably won't get it until you've stopped for at least the first six months.

### BELLY BLADDER AND PELVIC FLOOR

Your midsection has gone through a lot of changes as your baby has developed; now that you're a mom, be patient about getting back to your prepregnancy look. If you've had a C-section, your lower abs are likely sore, thanks to the incision. It'll take about six weeks for that scar to heal,



*Some down-there discomfort is natural after a vaginal delivery—but if something seems wrong, see your doctor.*

Your breasts may not be as symmetrical after pregnancy, because of hormonal changes.

# BREASTS



## Yes, Your Boobs Really Are Bigger

In large part, this is due to the ductal glands filling with milk—but in addition, some of the weight you may have gained during pregnancy is also stored in the breast tissue. Engorgement peaks two or three days after delivery; your breasts may feel hard and sore, but it should start to go away within a couple of days, especially if you are breastfeeding. Ice

packs, anti-inflammatories like ibuprofen and supportive bras can all help.

Whether your breasts stay bigger is more individual, but many women may see a little more sagginess, says Tiffany Moore Simas, M.D. “Postpregnancy, your breasts tend to be a little softer and less firm, with more of a downward slope.” Luckily, it’s nothing a good bra can’t fix.

and in the meantime, it can feel itchy or numb. Try to avoid scratching (it can lead to an infection) and keep the area clean. Avoid tight-fitting clothes over the scar site, which can increase irritation.

About two-thirds of pregnant women experience diastasis recti, or a small gap between the right and left abdominal muscle walls that can occur when hormones make the connective tissue (called the linea alba) thin out to accommodate the enlarging uterus. To a certain extent, it may get better in the first eight weeks or so after delivery as hormone levels fall, but sometimes the tissue gets so stretched out that it loses its elasticity and can’t retract back to the original position—which can cause that baby bump to look like a permanent pooch. It can also make for weak core muscles that hinder your ability to perform daily activities, whether that’s lifting a load of laundry or pushing a stroller. Ask your doctor or a physical therapist about the best exercises to help heal and repair the muscles. (Note that certain moves, like crunches, can actually make it worse, so it pays to ask the pros.)

Your pelvic floor muscles may also need a little extra attention postpregnancy. If you find yourself leaking when you sneeze, laugh or exercise, these muscles (which support the uterus, bladder, vagina and rectum) can be retrained and strengthened with exercises like Kegels. Severely weak or damaged muscles can create a prolapse, or a weak spot in the wall of the vagina that can allow the bladder, rectum or uterus to drop out of position.

## When It’s More Than Just Baby Blues

Meagan Gordon Scheuerman spent her entire pregnancy looking forward to being a mom—so she was surprised, when her son was born, that things felt less than rosy. “I was sold a fairy tale about how you will experience unimagined love—but most of the first year, it felt like I was underwater, watching the world go by without fully interacting with it.”

Scheuerman dismissed the idea that she was depressed. “I didn’t feel overwhelming sadness—it was more like nothing really mattered.”

It took a few more months until Scheuerman finally sought the help she needed—eventually consulting a therapist, who suggested medication to alleviate her symptoms. “About two weeks into it, I finally felt happy, and I realized it had been almost a full year since

I had felt that way,” recalls Scheuerman, who went on to write a book about her experience, *Babies Are the Worst: A Memoir About Motherhood, PPD, & Beyond*.

“I wanted to share with other moms that having some sort of postpartum depression, anxiety or other mental health issue is nothing to be ashamed of,” she notes. “If you are feeling angry, sad or surprised at how difficult motherhood can be, don’t be afraid to talk to someone.”

Postpartum depression, or PPD, is relatively common, affecting about 15 percent of all new moms. Left untreated, it can linger for years, affecting both the mother and the baby’s health. “Like baby blues, PPD can start with feelings of sadness as well as a loss of interest in things, feelings of guilt, a loss of pleasure, lack

of energy and sleepiness,” says obstetrician Tiffany Moore Simas. But while baby blues generally resolve within a couple of weeks, PPD can linger much longer and create an inability to function, along with severe feelings of hopelessness and guilt. Teens, veterans and women of color are all at greater risk.

In addition to PPD, women may also experience other mental health concerns following pregnancy. “Not every case is depression—if you’re concerned or don’t like what you are thinking or feeling, or if you are developing fearful or intrusive thoughts, it’s important to reach out to a family member or loved one and get help as soon as possible,” she says. “If you feel like you’re struggling more than you should, keep saying something until you find someone who listens.”

Pressure in your groin, pain during sex and frequent peeing can signal this problem, which can also often be treated with pelvic floor exercises.

### SKIN AND HAIR

Your growing baby bump and boobs stretch the tissue of your skin, but

most of the time, things return to prepregnancy shape and size relatively quickly. You may, however, develop stretch marks around your belly and breasts that are a more lasting reminder of when baby was on board. Up to 90 percent of expecting women get these pink, red or purplish

## “IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING EMOTIONALLY, TALK TO SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP.”

TIFANY MOORE SIMAS, M.D.

streaks, according to *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Genetics plays a large part in who gets stretch marks, but rapid weight gain can also make a difference—as can fairer skin, which tends to show visible marks more easily. There's no miracle cure for these, says Moore Simas, but “it never hurts to moisturize.” (Cocoa butter is a popular option.) Vitamin C-rich foods may also help keep skin elastic and toned. Most stretch marks also simply fade over time.

Some women may also notice small growths, called skin tags, which tend to develop in areas where the skin rubs against another area and can be caused by hormones during pregnancy. Common spots include the underarms, under the breasts, between the thighs and along the neck and eyelids. They're completely harmless, says Moore Simas, but they can also become irritated by friction. A dermatologist can typically snip them off or use liquid

nitrogen to freeze them or an electric needle to burn them off. (Don't worry, you'll get a numbing agent first so it's painless.)

Weight gain from pregnancy can also cause some women to develop varicose veins, in areas like the legs or even the vulva, says Moore Simas. “In most cases, this will get better following delivery—but it can be a more permanent condition,” she notes. Spider veins (the small red or bluish veins that can run up and down your legs) are also a common pregnancy side effect. They also generally start to fade after birth, although in some cases, they can be longer lasting.

You may also notice some surprising changes in your locks. Fluctuating hormones can make straight hair curly or vice versa; you may also notice some thinning out as hair that had stopped shedding during pregnancy suddenly starts to come out. Don't worry too much; it should settle down within a few

weeks. But changes in texture can be longer lasting—and, in some cases, may be permanent.

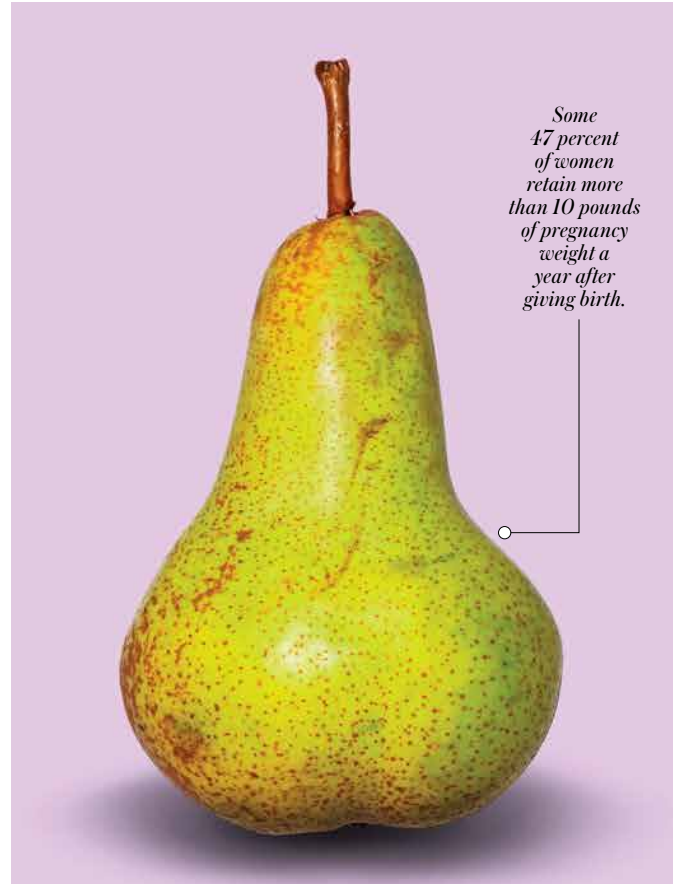
### SKELETON

During pregnancy, your body produces a hormone called relaxin that makes your joints and ligaments looser (to accommodate baby's journey down the birth canal). But it can take up to five months for your joints to regain their stability. Your hips may also stay wider. In the meantime, your feet may have also grown, thanks to both the increased levels of relaxin and pregnancy-related weight gain, which can cause arches to relax and flatten and the area between bones to expand. Often, this is a more permanent change; you may need a shoe-wardrobe upgrade.

### BRAIN AND HORMONES

In addition to the many physical differences noted above, there's a lot going on upstairs, most of which can't be seen but is very real. “Immediately following the delivery of the placenta, there is a precipitous drop in hormones that can have a substantial effect on your mood,” explains Moore Simas.

Up to 80 percent of women develop “baby blues”—a highly



Some 47 percent of women retain more than 10 pounds of pregnancy weight a year after giving birth.

emotional state in which you can find yourself weepy, tearful or simply out of sorts. Other symptoms can include irritability, restlessness, anxiety, fatigue and difficulty concentrating. They typically last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours and generally start to go away a couple of weeks after pregnancy. “If you find your symptoms getting severe or lasting beyond those two weeks, it may be the sign of postpartum depression,” says Moore Simas. (See “When It's More Than Just Baby Blues,” page 35.)

In the meantime, oxytocin (the “love” hormone) is coursing through your body as you bond with your baby. This increase in oxytocin can increase anxiety levels and influence both your mood and energy levels. At the same time, thyroid hormones (which play a part in regulating body temperature as well as metabolism) can also start to fluctuate. Up to 10 percent of women experience postpartum thyroiditis, an inflammation of the thyroid gland, which can lead to such symptoms as anxiety, insomnia, rapid heart rate and fatigue, in the short term, and weight gain, constipation, depression and dry skin up to eight months after birth. A simple blood test can help diagnose the condition, which can be treated with medication. +

## Signs of Postpartum Depression

- 1 Feeling sad, hopeless, empty or overwhelmed
- 2 Crying more often than usual or for no apparent reason
- 3 Worrying or feeling overly anxious
- 4 Feeling moody, irritable or restless
- 5 Oversleeping or being unable to sleep even when the baby is asleep
- 6 Having trouble concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- 7 Experiencing anger or rage
- 8 Losing interest in activities that are usually enjoyable
- 9 Suffering from physical aches and pains, including frequent headaches, stomach problems and muscle pain
- 10 Eating too little or too much
- 11 Withdrawing from or avoiding friends and family
- 12 Having trouble bonding or forming an emotional attachment with the baby
- 13 Persistently doubting your ability to care for the baby
- 14 Thinking about harming yourself or the baby

SOURCE: NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH