

Caring for your wound after a Caesarean section

This leaflet provides information on the most common complications of Caesarean sections. It also explains the steps that you and the hospital can take to reduce your risk of developing a wound infection.

What can I expect after my operation?

A Caesarean section is a major operation. It will take some time for you to return to normal. The outside skin edges of your wound should seal after about two days but the internal healing of muscle and other tissue below the surface goes on for many months. After your operation you may expect:

- Pain – even quite small movements such as moving in bed, coughing and laughing can be uncomfortable. Simple painkillers can help but if you don't feel the pain is controlled, speak to your midwife or GP.
- Vaginal discharge and bleeding.
- A surgical wound – in most cases the wound will be 10 - 15 cm long, sitting just below and following your bikini line. It will be held closed by an absorbable stitch.

Am I likely to get a wound infection?

Surveillance undertaken by the Health Protection Agency has shown that approximately one in 10 women having a Caesarean section may develop a wound infection. This is higher than other similar types of surgery and more research is being undertaken to try to understand this better. However, we know that the following things can increase the risk of wound infection:

- Being overweight
- Smoking
- Diabetes
- A poor diet without enough nutrients

It may not be possible to change these factors, especially if your operation was not planned. However, by following the advice below, we can aim to reduce the risk of infection occurring and ensure that any problems are spotted quickly.

What does the hospital do to reduce the risk of infection?

The hospital follows national guidelines on preventing wound infections, including:

- Taking swabs from your nose and groin for MRSA (meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*). You will be offered treatment to clear this if you are found to be carrying MRSA.
- Using sterile hair clippers rather than a razor to remove any hair at the operation site.
- Giving antibiotics immediately before the operation.
- Ensuring thorough handwashing during your care.
- Using an absorbable stitch to close the wound.
- Keeping a dressing on your wound for the first 48 hours.
- Monitoring your wound for the first 30 days after surgery as part of the national surveillance programme.

What can I do myself to prevent complications?

It is important to balance your and your baby's needs during pregnancy so you should always discuss what you plan to do with your midwife or GP before making changes.

The following advice is suitable for all women:

- If your Caesarean section is planned, have your MRSA swabs taken two to six weeks beforehand.
- Shower or bath on the day of your operation.
- It is not necessary to shave your bikini line before surgery. The tiny cuts that occur from using a razor can increase the risk of infection.
- Look after your wound as described below.
- Do not allow anyone to touch your wound unless they have washed their hands first.
- Report any problems with your wound promptly to your midwife or GP.

How should I look after my wound?

For the first 48 hours in hospital your wound will be covered by a waterproof, absorbent dressing. This will be changed by the staff if there is any leakage from the wound. The following are the things you should be aware of or things you can do to help yourself:

- Keep your skin generally clean and wash regularly, especially in your groin area.
- Always wash your hands before touching your wound or dressing.
- After 48 hours the midwife will change the dressing and check your wound.
- Normally the midwife will apply another dressing to provide protection to the wound. This dressing can remain in place for up to three days as long as there is no leakage, or additional pain and tenderness in the wound.
- If the dressing has not already been removed, you should remove the dressing on the fifth day after delivery.
- Showering is preferable to bathing.
- Do not rub soap, shower gels, or talc directly onto the healing wound.
- Pat the wound dry with a **clean** towel or a piece of clean kitchen roll kept just for this purpose.
- Wear loose-fitting underwear to prevent rubbing the wound – boxer shorts are often most comfortable.
- Occasionally the end of the absorbable stitch (which can look like nylon fishing line) may poke through the skin where the knot is tied. Please do not pull this. It will fall off naturally. If it is catching on your clothing, ask your midwife or GP to trim it for you.

What are the signs of infection?

The following signs could mean that you have an infection. You should report these to your midwife or GP as soon as possible:

- You have more pain in the wound or your womb than you have been experiencing since delivery
- Your wound is red, swollen or hot
- Your wound has green or yellow weeping or discharge
- You have an unpleasant vaginal discharge
- You are feeling feverish or have a high temperature

What else can I do?

- Do not lift anything heavier than your baby for six weeks
- Do not drive for six weeks
- Rest when possible
- Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids

- Support your wound during coughing, laughing or sudden movements

Surveillance of wound infections

St. Mary's Maternity Unit participates in a national programme run by The Health Protection Agency to monitor the rates of infection experienced by women having Caesarean sections. This important work enables us to compare the experience of women at Poole with other hospitals to ensure our services are as effective as possible.

If you agree, when you are discharged home you will be given a questionnaire to fill in about your wound. It should be completed on or around the 30th day after your operation and returned to us in the self-addressed envelope provided. Your midwife will also complete a separate form when you are discharged from her care. Your information is held securely by the hospital and only shared anonymously with the Health Protection Agency.

Further information

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2008) - Preventing and treating surgical site infections. Available at: <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG74SSIUNG.pdf.pdf>

Health Protection Agency (2011) Monitoring Wounds for Infections. Available at: http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/HPAweb_C/1203084355902

Contact details

Denise Richards

Matron, Infection Prevention and Control

Telephone: 01202 448406

For further general health-related information, please ask the relevant department for an Information Prescription or contact:

The Health Information Centre
Poole Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Longfleet Road
Poole
Dorset
BH15 2JB
Telephone: 01202 448003

www.poole.nhs.uk

Author: Denise Richards

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Ward sister/head of department: Denise Richards



We can supply this information in other formats, in larger print, on audiotape, or have it translated for you. Please call the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01202 448499, text 07758 272495 or email pals@poole.nhs.uk for advice.

If you wish to make any comments or to ask about any research evidence used to write this leaflet, please contact the Patient Information Team confidentially: phone 01202 448003, write to the Health Information Centre (address above), or email patient.information@poole.nhs.uk.