

Postpartum Hormones

A Nurture Network Fact Sheet

Congratulations on this incredible journey you are about to embark on! The arrival of a little one in your life is a magical, transformative experience. We are often aware of the changes to our life that we are about to experience – the sleepless nights, constant feeding and caretaking that we will need to do. Most of us also know that our body will undergo significant changes in the process of pregnancy and we can prepare (somewhat!) for these.

However, the postpartum period also presents its own physical challenges, including a whole range of hormonal fluctuations. These are essential for processes such as milk production, uterine involution (the process of the uterus returning to its pre-pregnancy size) and emotional bonding with your baby. However, they can also impact quite a bit on your emotional wellbeing as you adjust to the “new normal” of life with your little one while riding this hormonal rollercoaster. This guide gives a little overview of some of the key hormonal changes that take place so you can hold this in mind when you have trickier days and maybe show yourself some compassion during this time of transition.

First, let's take a look at which hormones play a role during the postpartum period:

Oestrogen & Progesterone

These hormones, which were elevated during pregnancy, rapidly decrease after childbirth. This drop is so significant that they are close to menopausal levels after baby is born. Oestrogen increases serotonin which helps to balance mood and progesterone can have a soothing effect on mood. However, changing levels can cause irritability, anxiety and depression in some women.

Oxytocin

Oxytocin, often called the “love hormone” or “bonding hormone”, helps to stimulate uterine contractions during labour and also plays a role in breastmilk letdown. Oxytocin contributes to the emotional bonding between a mother and her baby and also acts as a stress-reducer by lowering levels of cortisol (the stress hormone). However, research has also suggested that, during times of stress (and the postpartum period can often be stressful) oxytocin may amplify feelings of fear or anxiety.

Prolactin

Prolactin levels rise after childbirth, stimulating milk production. This hormone is responsible for initiating and maintaining breastfeeding

Endorphins

Endorphins, natural painkillers and mood boosters, are released during labour and contribute to feelings of euphoria and wellbeing after childbirth.

Cortisol

Cortisol, a stress hormone, remains elevated immediately after childbirth due to the physical stress of labour. However, it typically returns to normal levels within a few days. The physical effects of high cortisol levels can include anxiety and irritability, mood swings and difficulties with concentration or focus.

How do these hormonal fluctuations impact on your wellbeing?

The “baby blues”

The “baby blues” are a common and usually temporary experience in the days and weeks following childbirth. Many women will experience mood swings, feelings of sadness and emotional sensitivity. While this might not feel very comfortable and is often a little unexpected (especially if you were looking forward to existing in your own little “love bubble” for those first few weeks with your newborn!), the baby blues are a normal and temporary reaction as you adjust to the hormonal changes and the emotional and physical demands of giving birth and caring for a newborn.



If you're experiencing the baby blues, you might:

- Feel teary or emotionally sensitive
- Experience moments of sadness or irritability

within the first few days after giving birth and for up to about two weeks afterwards (this is the period of significant hormonal changes). Support from family and friends, getting as much rest as you can, proper nutrition and taking breaks when needed are essential in helping you to cope during this period. If these feelings last for longer than the first two weeks, get worse or if they begin to impact on your ability to get through the day or care for yourself and your baby, it's important that you seek professional support from your GP or Public Health Nurse.

Physical changes

Some of the physical changes associated with these postpartum hormonal fluctuations can come as a surprise to many women and can also impact on their sense of wellbeing during this time.

- **Breast Changes:** Even if you don't plan to breastfeed, hormones like prolactin and oxytocin will stimulate milk production and can result in breast engorgement, increased breast size and changes in nipple sensitivity which can be quite uncomfortable for some women. Seeking support from your GP, Public Health Nurse or a lactation consultant can help with managing these changes, whether you plan to breastfeed or not.
- **Night Sweats:** These are episodes of excessive sweating that occur during sleep and can be caused by hormonal changes, stress and the body's natural process of eliminating excess fluids retained during pregnancy. Maintaining good sleep hygiene (as best you can with a newborn!), dressing in light, breathable fabrics and staying well-hydrated can help manage this discomfort. While night sweats are a common experience, their intensity and duration can vary; if your night sweats are severe or persistent it's important to contact your GP or Public Health Nurse.
- **Hair Loss:** During pregnancy, elevated hormones can prolong the growth phase of hair, resulting in thicker and healthier-looking hair (thank you pregnancy!) After childbirth, the hormonal decrease triggers a shedding phase and some women may experience temporary hair loss.

A Final Note

We hope you've found this factsheet helpful! The postpartum period is a time of profound physical and emotional adjustments, shaped in part by the intricate dance of hormones within your body. The impact of postpartum hormone changes on maternal wellbeing is complex and multifaceted, ranging from the blissful bonding facilitated by oxytocin to the challenges posed by hormonal fluctuations and their effects on mood and physical recovery. Every woman's experience will be unique and is shaped by factors like genetics, lifestyle and individual circumstances.

Recognising and understanding these hormonal shifts is crucial for both you and your support network (and please feel free to share this with those who will be supporting you if you feel it will help!) The baby blues, hormonal mood swings and physical changes are part of the journey and seeking support, whether from healthcare professionals, family or friends is a vital step in navigating this period and giving you the best opportunity to care for yourself and your new little one!

Who we are

Nurture Network aims to promote perinatal and infant wellbeing for all new families in Ireland.

Please check out our website for more resources:

www.nurturenetwork.ie

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