Is it normal to have bleeding after birth?

Yes, bleeding in the days or weeks after birth (also called lochia) is completely normal and occurs regardless of whether you have a vaginal birth or caesarean section.

What is normal blood loss after birth?

Women’s experiences of bleeding after birth vary considerably. In the first few days after birth, the majority of women experience moderate to heavy bleeding, however some experience minimal bleeding.

This early bleeding is usually more red in colour. Over the next few days to weeks this bleeding will gradually decrease and will change colour. Women describe their blood loss to be brownish-red, pinkish-red, pale pink or a creamy colour.

The majority of women will stop bleeding between 4 and 6 weeks, however some women experience bleeding for longer than this. It is also common for bleeding to be heavier after breastfeeding.

What causes normal blood loss and how does the body control this blood loss?

The placenta is attached to the wall of the uterus and blood vessels run between the placenta and the uterus. After birth, the uterus contracts which causes the placenta to come away from the wall of the uterus. The contracted uterus constricts (squeezes) the blood vessels to prevent excessive blood loss. The uterus needs to stay contracted to prevent excessive blood loss.

All women respond differently to blood loss. This means that, for some women, a small amount of blood loss can negatively affect their body, while for other women losing the same amount of blood is not an issue. This depends on many factors including the woman’s health and existing conditions e.g. anaemia.

What is abnormal blood loss after birth?

When a woman’s blood loss starts to affect her physical health, it is considered abnormal and is called a postpartum haemorrhage (or PPH). A PPH can happen immediately after birth or up to 6 weeks later. In severe cases, PPH can be life threatening.

For some women, a small amount of blood loss can negatively affect physical health, while for other women losing the same amount of blood is not a problem. A woman’s tolerance for blood loss depends on many factors including her health and any pre-existing health conditions e.g. anaemia. To give you an idea of volume, most women will tolerate losing up to 500ml of blood. This, however, can be different for every woman. Blood loss of over 500ml after birth is generally considered a PPH.

What about blood clots?

It is common to experience blood clots after having a baby, however the size is important. Large blood clots can form in the uterus and can interfere with the uterus contracting. This can lead to increased blood loss.

How can I tell whether I am bleeding too much?

The following signs may help you to work out whether you are bleeding too much:

- If you have a sudden and continued increase in your blood loss
- If the blood suddenly changes in colour to a brighter red
- If you are experiencing heavy blood loss and are feeling dizzy, weak, sweaty, pale, have a fast heartbeat or rapid pulse
- If your vaginal discharge is offensive (smelly) – this may indicate infection

Every woman is different, however as a general guide – if it has been more than 24 hours since birth and you are still soaking more than 1 maxi-pad every 2 hours, you may be bleeding too much and you should check with your care provider.
What should I do if I’m worried about bleeding or blood clots?

If you are worried about your bleeding at any stage, you can call or visit your care provider, GP or hospital’s maternity ward.

What causes PPH?

PPH can be caused by:

- A poorly contracted uterus (called uterine atony) – the uterus does not contract properly and therefore the blood vessels do not constrict adequately.
- Tissue – which is the result of tissue (for example, pieces of the placenta still remaining the uterus) preventing the uterus from contracting effectively.
- Trauma – which is the result of trauma (injury) to the vagina, perineum, cervix or uterus.

How can I feel for a well contracted uterus?

In the first 24 hours after birth, the top of your uterus (the fundus) can be felt around the level of your belly button. In the days after birth, your uterus will slowly decrease in size. At around day 7-10 the uterus will have contracted so much that it back inside the pelvis. At this stage you will no longer be able to feel your fundus (see Figure 1).

If you are worried about your bleeding and you’re not at hospital, you can do a self-check to see whether your uterus is still contracted.

To do this, first find your fundus. You will find it somewhere below, and in line with, your belly button. If your uterus is properly contracted it will feel a bit like a grapefruit in size and texture. If your uterus feels quite spongy then it is probably not properly contracted.

After birth, it can be helpful to ask your care provider to help you locate your fundus so that you can understand what your uterus feels like when it is well-contracted. This can allow you notice if your uterus is not well-contracted.

If your uterus is not well-contracted you can use massage to help it contract. To do this find your fundus and rub your fingers in firm circular motions. The massage may feel uncomfortable, however if painful you can adjust the firmness. If the massage is working, you will feel that your uterus begin to harden under your fingers.

If your uterus does not contract when you massage it, keeps relaxing or if you are worried the amount of bloody loss, you can call or visit your care provider, GP or your hospital’s maternity ward.

Figure 1. A diagram showing the position of the fundus at day 1 through to day 9 after birth.