

Sex After Baby

It's been four months since we had the baby and I still don't want to have sex," Ann told me. "We used to make love all the time. We tried once, about a month ago, but it hurt so much I had to stop. Now whenever I think about it I'm just scared of the pain. My husband is getting impatient. I'm exhausted all the time and I feel fat. How am I supposed to get in the mood? Why would I even want to?"



Dr. Jenn

If I had a dollar for every new mom that told me that, I'd be writing this column from my vacation home in the Bahamas. Even before parenthood, there is usually one partner with a higher sex drive than the other; it's rare that a couple starts at exactly the same libido level. But once you throw in childbirth, sleepless nights, dirty diapers, an episiotomy, leaky breasts and estrogen deprivation, the odds of you chasing after your spouse for sex are low. Don't despair: Your sex life is not lost... just on hiatus. With a little education and preparation, you'll be back in the saddle again.

To achieve your goal you need to understand that your desire is affected by both your physical and psychological well-being,

both of which have been severely impacted by pregnancy and childbirth.

Although you may feel as though you are just not in the mood, there are actual physiological reasons why your libido may have changed. According to Dr. Jessica Schneider, a Century City obstetrician/gynecologist, the main reason is related to breast feeding.

"Because of the elevated levels of prolactin, which are necessary for milk production, estrogen gets suppressed which leads to vaginal dryness and decreased libido, similar to menopause," Schneider says. Since this can cause sex to be painful, keep a bottle of lubricant nearby until your body has returned to its former, lubricated self.

Some women, especially those who have had a cesarean or an episiotomy, need more than the standard doctor-recommended six weeks to heal. However, many new mothers find they are afraid of hurting themselves or are anticipating soreness, so they choose to abstain rather than risk pain or injury.

Of course, there are also significant psychological reasons why many new moms don't feel "in the mood." To begin with, becoming a new mother is all-consuming. Much like falling in love, it is powerful and intense and leaves little room in your psyche for much else. Unlike adult love, your love object is utterly dependant upon you for all

of his or her needs. In the beginning, many women find that making love with their husband feels like a distraction from their role as a mother.

Some new mothers find it difficult to integrate their new identity as a mother with their identity as a sexual being. In addition to the fact that changing diapers and Baby Bjorns don't tend to make a woman feel sexy, few women have had role models who discussed this transition with them.

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Fortunately, there are more and more "sexy mom" role models in the media, but every woman must integrate these two parts of themselves in their own way.

Another major contributor to loss of desire is that women often feel uncomfortable in their own bodies until they are able to take off their pregnancy weight. Women who had body-image issues or eating disorders before pregnancy are particularly susceptible to this problem. I encourage you not to let "feeling fat" stand in the way of making love with your partner. Studies have shown that women tend to be far more

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critical of their own bodies than men are. The odds are that assessing changes in your physical aesthetics is going to be the last thing on his mind while making love with you. Try to think of sex as a way to connect with him. Gender psychology has shown that women need to feel loved to have sex, but most men need to have sex to feel loved. Show him you care.

Sleep deprivation is the antibody to good sex. One study in the International Journal of Neuroscience, which examined the functioning of volunteers after one day of sleep deprivation found that participants had reduced cognitive functions such as motor, rhythm, receptive and expressive speech, memory, and complex verbal arithmetic functions. While you are probably not computing algebraic equations as you have sex with your spouse, what this study does point out is the result of not sleeping enough means you are probably not as in control of your body, not thinking quite as clearly, and may not be able to express yourself as quickly and easily as you have in the past. This combination of handicaps tends to impair your sexual performance and enjoyment. Another study in Pediatrics found a strong correlation between infant sleep problems and postpartum depression in

mothers.

Postpartum depression symptomology, usually appearing 3-6 months after giving birth, can zap a woman's libido. It has been estimated that 10-20% of women experience this type of depression after childbirth. Researchers believe it is caused by a combination of circumstances and chemical imbalances. If you think you may be experiencing postpartum depression, it is important to seek help before it escalates. The combination of psychotherapy and medication has been shown to be extremely effective treatment.

The good news is that even though many women feel like they will never be back to their formerly sexual selves, Dr. Schneider reports, "In most cases interest in and satisfaction with sex returned to early pregnancy levels within 12 months."

Now that's not so bad, is it?

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, and many more. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.

