

Enhancing maternal recovery following caesarean birth

The latest statistics indicate that births via caesarean section account for 29% of recorded births in England (NHS Digital, 2018).

Given that a significant number of women will experience a caesarean section (C-section), it is important that health visitors have the knowledge, skills and competence to support women when they are recovering from the birth. Having a C-section is major abdominal surgery which carries some risks for the mother and the baby. It is likely that the recovery may take longer than a vaginal birth, with pain and discomfort for a few weeks afterwards (NHS, 2019). It is hoped that 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery', which has been developed by a health visitor with a background in midwifery, will enhance health visitors' understanding of recovery from C-section and their care of women and their families.

Following a national review of maternity services in 2015, recommendations for births in England were published in the "Better Births: Improving outcomes for maternity services in England - a five-year forward view for maternity care" (NHS, 2016) report. "Better Births" provides a framework with seven key priorities to improve services across England and makes care more specific to the woman's and family's needs.

Key priorities identified following consultation with women in this report are:

- Personalised care
- Continuity of carer
- Better postnatal and perinatal mental health care
- Safer care
- Multi-professional working
- Working across boundaries; and
- Fairer payment systems.

The NHS 10-year plan also stresses the need for greater initiatives to improve safety, continuity of care and to take steps to ensure that every expectant mother is supported – from pregnancy, during the birth and in those critical first months of parenthood (DHSC, 2019).

What is 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery'?

'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' is a visual tool for women, their families, health visitors and midwives that uses the digits of the hand to explain the five layers of healing involved in recovery from C-section.



How does 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' work?

- The clinician's own hand, held with fingers spread, represents the five layers of healing that need to occur following a C-Section. This helps to visualise the abdominal healing involved following C-section and reinforce advice to women and their families about recovery from C-section. Further information about recovery from C-section is available on the NHS website: <http://bit.ly/2UyeOKj> (NHS, 2019).
- It promotes discussion around the different layers of healing involved in recovery and helps women and their families become aware of potential problems.
- 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' can be used by health visitors during the antenatal contact to support a woman and her family to prepare for a C-section or during postnatal contacts to promote their recovery.
- It provides consistent, easy to remember messages to women, their families and health professionals.

More information on page 2

For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this GPP version was created on 06/05/2020.

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What are the five layers of healing involved following C-section?

- **The thumb is layer one and is the skin wound.** ‘Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery’ can promote a discussion around how a woman perceives her skin wound is healing and the signs and symptoms of infection can be explained. (NHS, 2019)
- **The index finger is layer two and is the fat layer or adipose tissue layer.** By identifying the fat layer, women can be taught about potential problems that can occur in recovery; these include redness, leaking of fluid and infection. (NHS, 2019)
- **The middle finger is layer three and involves the separation of the abdominal muscles.** ‘Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery’ can help explain that muscles are affected in a C-section and need to heal following a C-section. It is acknowledged that women can experience pain after C-section and that good pain management is important (NICE, 2011). ‘Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery’ can provide a reminder to discuss pain management at contacts. It can also be helpful to mention within this section, that abdominal muscle healing following pregnancy takes approximately eight weeks (NHS, 2019) and that it is recommended for women to undertake pelvic floor exercises and exercises for the abdominal muscles. There are specific topic sections that address post-pregnancy fitness on the NHS website (<https://bit.ly/2UMwv8p>) and please see reference section for further information.
- **The ring finger is layer four and involves the separation of the peritoneum.** Highlighting this to women may help them understand more about the healing involved post C-section and promote opportunity to discuss resumption of activities such as physical activity, driving and hobbies.
- **The little finger represents the fifth layer and is the womb.** The womb is sutured with two layers and will take up to six weeks to repair. By highlighting that the womb is also recovering, this can provide opportunities to promote the importance of women and their partners making informed choices on returning to sexual relationships, contraception, future pregnancies and the woman’s health.

General advice on recovery from C-section

- Health visitor postnatal contacts provide an ideal opportunity to discuss contraception and planning for future pregnancies, including preconception care. Signpost to NHS “Your contraception guide - When can I use contraception after having a baby?” <https://bit.ly/2UJ8m2y>. Public Health England’s “Health Matters” provides a useful summary of evidence to support preconception care: <https://bit.ly/2YOctgv>
- Remind women about the importance of cervical screening and ask them when they last had a cervical smear.
- Alongside enquiries about physical health, health visitors should actively promote family mental health and wellbeing, and enquire about mental health at routine contacts in line with NICE Guidance CG 192/ QS 115, clinical judgement and local organisational policy and protocols.
- Some women may want to speak about their birth options for a subsequent pregnancy. There is good evidence that women need good quality information in order to help them make an informed choice between vaginal birth after C-section (VBAC) and an elective C-section. Information can increase women’s knowledge of birth choices and help decision-making and is most helpful if it is individualised and provided at the right time. Be guided by the woman and signpost to the useful leaflet by RCOG “Birth options after previous caesarean section”: <https://bit.ly/2wYTK6m>
- It is really helpful to talk about what women can expect to receive next in their care, such as their 6-week postnatal check with their GP and also with their health visitor. Signpost to NHS “Your pregnancy and baby guide - Your 6-week postnatal check”: <https://bit.ly/3e1xl8T>

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Good Practice Points for health visitors

- This GPP reminds us of the importance of providing women with personalised evidence-based support and advice to enhance their recovery following a C-section. Whilst a C-section is generally a very safe procedure, like any type of surgery it carries a certain amount of risk. It's important that women are aware of the possible complications and ways to maximise their recovery.
- Implementation of 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' at contacts, promotes a discussion with women and their families about their recovery from C-section. This can provide vital information and can also assist a health visitor to assess the impact of maternal recovery from C-section on the whole family and offer individualised support. In line with the principles of "Working Together to Safeguard Children", the needs of the baby should remain central to all assessments and actions to ensure every child has the best outcomes (HM Government, 2018).
- 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' is a visual tool that can support women and partners in their understanding of C-section and ways to enhance the woman's recovery following the birth. It also provides a useful way for the health visitor to discuss preconception care for subsequent pregnancies and the adoption of healthier behaviours to support positive health outcomes for both themselves and their child.

Further information on 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery'

'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' is now a programme that is delivered to health visitors who are employed by Derbyshire Community Health Services NHS Foundation Trust, the author's employer.

Further information on the author and 'Five Guide - Enhancing Caesarean Section Recovery' is available on the Royal College of Nursing website: - <http://bit.ly/2S6no1b>

A short workforce development video is available on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/3bhENLP>

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