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Physical health and recovery in the first 18 months postpartum: does cesarean section reduce long-term morbidity?

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Research examining **long-term** health outcomes for women **after childbirth** has been limited. The objective of this study was to investigate the natural history of common morbidities in the 18 months **after** the birth of a first child, and to explore the hypothesis that women who have a cesarean section for a first birth experience less overall morbidity in the postnatal period.

METHODS: A prospective nulliparous pregnancy cohort study was conducted of 1,507 women recruited in early pregnancy from six public hospitals in Melbourne, Australia (mean gestation 15 weeks). Follow-up questionnaires at 3, 6, 12, and 18 months postpartum included standardized measures of urinary and fecal incontinence, and a symptom checklist asking about common physical health problems.

RESULTS: At 6, 12, and 18 months postpartum, no statistically significant differences were found in the proportion of women reporting three or more health problems by method of birth. Compared with women who had a spontaneous vaginal birth, women who had a cesarean section were more likely to report extreme tiredness at 6 months postpartum (adjusted OR: 1.39; 95% CI: 1.07-1.82) and at 12 months postpartum (adjusted OR: 1.40; 95% CI: 1.05-1.85), and were more likely to report **back pain** at 6 months postpartum (adjusted OR: 1.37; 95% CI: 1.06-1.77) and at 12 months postpartum (adjusted OR: 1.41; 95% CI: 1.06-1.87). Women who had a cesarean section were less likely to report urinary incontinence at 3, 6, and 12 months postpartum, respectively (adjusted OR: 0.26; 95% CI: 0.19-0.36; adjusted OR: 0.36; 95% CI: 0.25-0.52; adjusted OR: 0.48; 95% CI: 0.33-0.68). For all other physical health problems the pattern of morbidity did not differ between cesarean section and spontaneous vaginal birth.

CONCLUSIONS: Physical health problems commonly persist or recur throughout the first 18 months postpartum, with potential **long-term** consequences for women's health. Cesarean section does not result in women experiencing less overall morbidity in the postpartum period compared with women who have a spontaneous vaginal birth.

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