

Umbilical Cord Care

During pregnancy, the umbilical cord is the baby's connection to the mother. After birth, the cord is cut, and the stump remains connected to the baby. This is where the navel (belly button) will be. You'll be taught some simple steps to care for the cord stump after taking your baby home. Although there are a few things to watch out for, problems with the umbilical cord stump are rare. It usually falls off within a few weeks.

What is the umbilical cord?

While your baby was in the womb, he or she was connected to you by two important organs: the placenta and the umbilical cord. The umbilical cord is the fetus's "life support system" during pregnancy; it contains blood vessels that provide oxygen and nutrition. At birth, the umbilical cord is cut, and the stump remains attached to the baby.

During the first few weeks after birth, the umbilical cord stump gradually dries and heals. It falls off on its own within a few weeks. During this time, some simple care is needed to keep the cord clean and dry. You should be alert for any signs of infection or bleeding; however, these and other complications are uncommon. If any problems occur, or if the stump hasn't fallen off within 4 weeks, call your doctor's office.

What does it look like?

- Immediately after birth, the umbilical cord is cut. A clamp is placed near the cut end to prevent bleeding. The doctor examines the umbilical cord and placenta to make sure they are normal.
- Within a few days, the stump begins to dry out and becomes darker.
- For the first few weeks, simple care is needed to keep the cord stump dry and clean. You should sponge-bathe your baby during this time rather than bathing him or her in a tub.
- The cord stump gradually becomes dry and black. It should fall off on its own around this time. The area around your baby's new belly button will be a little red at first but should soon look like normal skin.

How do you care for the umbilical cord stump?

- Keep the cord stump clean and dry until it falls off. Wash your baby with a sponge or wash cloth and warm water.

(To keep your baby warm, baths should be quick during the first few weeks anyway.)

- At every diaper change, use soap and water to clean the area around the cord stump. Pull up gently on the stump and clean around its base. A little foul odor and moisture are normal in this area.
- Some doctors may recommend cleaning the stump with rubbing alcohol. You may clean the area with a small amount of rubbing alcohol on a cotton ball or swab or use packaged alcohol wipes. Try not to use more rubbing alcohol than is necessary.
- Keep the cord stump over the diaper; it should not be inside the diaper. You may need to fold down the top edge of the diaper.

Are there any possible problems?

Problems related to the umbilical cord stump are possible but uncommon:

- **Infection.** Infection of the cord stump (called "omphalitis") is the most serious problem. Although a little moisture and foul odor can be normal, draining fluid and redness of the skin around the stump may mean infection is present. *If drainage and redness are present, see your doctor right away.* (Just fluid, without redness, is most common with granuloma—not a serious problem.)
- **Bleeding.** There should be little or no bleeding from the cord stump. Bleeding is most likely to occur if the cord is pulled off too early.
- **Granuloma.** If the skin around the cord stump is slow to heal, umbilical granuloma may be present. The granuloma looks like a small, round growth. There is usually some wetness in the belly button. Umbilical granuloma is a relatively common problem that is not serious. Simple treatment may be needed, most commonly the use of silver nitrate to speed healing.
- **Prolonged separation.** This occurs when the umbilical cord stump takes longer than 3 to 4 weeks to fall off. It is usually not a serious problem.
- **Umbilical hernia.** Part of the intestines may stick out through the belly button after the cord stump falls off. You may notice a swollen area that gets larger when your baby coughs or cries. Usually, the swelling is easily pushed back into place. Treatment is usually not needed unless the hernia is very large or doesn't go away on its own.
- **Embryologic abnormalities.** These are problems occurring when the baby was forming in the mother's womb. They may include cysts or connections between the umbilicus (belly button) and the urinary system or intestines. Surgery may be needed to repair the abnormality.



Can umbilical cord problems be prevented?

Following steps to keep the umbilical cord stump clean and dry may help to prevent infections.

When should I call your office?

Umbilical cord problems are uncommon, but it is important to watch out for signs of infection or other problems.

-  Call our office *immediately* if any of the following occurs:
- Redness beyond the area immediately around the base of the cord stump.

- Active bleeding—more than a drop or two of blood from the cord stump.
- Drainage or moisture—a lot of fluid coming from the cord stump, or if moisture or drainage is present for more than a few days.
- Very foul odor.

Call our office if any of the following nonemergency conditions occurs:

- The cord stump doesn't fall off on its own within 4 weeks.
- Swelling is present under the skin around the belly button area.