

Physiotherapy Department

Post Natal Physiotherapy Advice And Exercises

This leaflet was produced by:
The Pelvic and Maternal Health Physiotherapy Team
Telephone 01603 287130 (24hr answer machine)

Congratulations on the birth of your baby

Your body has changed a lot during pregnancy and will gradually recover over the next few weeks and months. You can help this recovery by following the advice and exercises in this leaflet.

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In the first 24 hours after birth:

Start your pelvic floor muscle exercises

Remember to empty your bladder every 2 - 3 hours
(the normal feeling of wanting to wee may not return straightaway)

Try to move around as normally as possible

Enjoy being able to take a deep breath again

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

Where are the pelvic floor muscles?

Your pelvic floor muscles form a support from your pubic bone to your tailbone. They also go out to the sides, attaching to the bones that you sit on. Your urethra (bladder opening), vagina and back passage pass through these muscles.

Why are the pelvic floor muscles important?

Your pelvic floor muscles are important for bladder and bowel control and for satisfaction during sexual intercourse. Weak pelvic floor muscles may not support the bladder, uterus and bowel. This can contribute to vaginal prolapse (bulging of the pelvic organs within the vagina).

How do I start to do pelvic floor muscle exercises?

After giving birth you may have stitches or bruising to the pelvic floor area. Don't let this stop you from doing the exercises. Gentle movement will reduce swelling and help the healing process. Start to exercise your pelvic floor muscles within 24 hours of delivery (once you can empty your bladder as normal).

You can exercise your pelvic floor muscles in any position (lying down, sitting or standing). Tighten gently around your back passage and in your vagina and urethra. You should feel a squeeze and lift inside. Relax. This is a short squeeze. Repeat up to 10 times.

- When you can do this comfortably, try to hold the squeeze for 5 seconds, breathing gently. Do 5 squeezes, 5 times a day.
- As you improve, hold your squeeze for longer, up to 10 seconds, 10 times.
- Continue to do some short squeezes as well as the longer holds.

If you're doing your exercises correctly, no-one should be able to tell that you are doing them. Try not to move your leg or buttock muscles. Continue to breathe normally.

How often should I do the exercises?

Find some regular activities to remind you to do your pelvic floor muscle exercises. This might be while feeding your baby, washing your hands or cleaning your teeth. Aim to do these exercises 4-5 times daily.

Look after your Pelvic Floor Muscles

Avoid heavy lifting. If you need to lift - tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you lift

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you cough. The reflex that makes you do this naturally can stop working after having a baby. Regular practice protects your pelvic floor muscles and helps to train them to work automatically with a cough or sneeze

Avoid sit-ups and high impact exercise for at least 3 months after the birth

Avoid straining when you are emptying your bowels

Pain Relief

You may be given tablets if you are uncomfortable. Take these regularly as suggested. It will help you to keep mobile, which in turn helps the healing process.

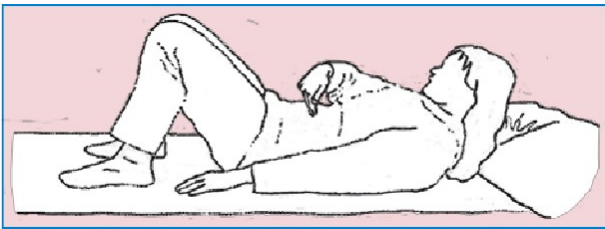
Ice packs can help reduce swelling and discomfort – ask your midwife or physiotherapist. To make a simple ice pack at home, wet a clean sanitary towel with water and freeze in a polythene bag. Wrap the frozen sanitary towel (without the bag) in a damp flannel, and place on your genital area for no longer than 5 minutes. Do not sit on an ice pack, as ice can burn.

Tummy Muscles

There are several layers of tummy muscles, which are joined down the middle (from your ribs to pelvis). These muscles are stretched by pregnancy. A member of the Physiotherapy Team may visit you to check how much they have stretched.

To check your tummy muscles yourself:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place your fingertips together just above your belly button
- Tuck your chin in towards your chest and lift your head and shoulders up off the floor



You should feel two vertical ridges (the edges of your muscles) pressing in against your fingers. See how many fingers you can fit in between these muscles.

If the gap between your tummy muscles is less than two fingers wide:

- continue with all of the exercises in this leaflet

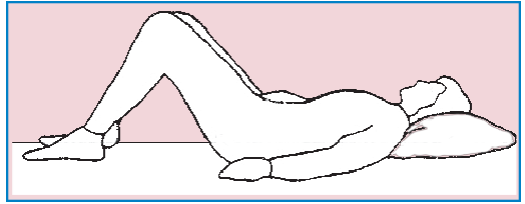
If the gap is larger than two fingers wide:

- continue with exercises 1 and 2
- keep checking the gap weekly
- once the gap is two fingers or less, continue with exercise 3
- avoid making your stomach bulge with activities such as lifting and getting in and out of bed.

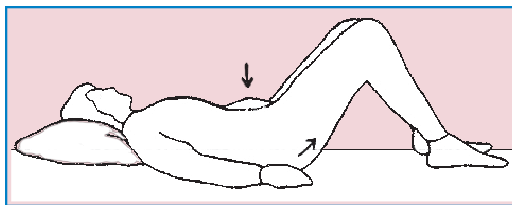
The following exercises will help to strengthen your deep abdominal muscles. Try to do these twice a day. If they cause you pain or discomfort you should stop practicing them and speak to a health professional.

Exercise 1 – drawing in

- Lie on your side or back with your knees slightly bent.
- Let your tummy relax completely.
- Gently draw in the lower part of your tummy as you breathe out. It may help to squeeze your pelvic floor muscles at the same time.
- Hold for 5 seconds, breathing normally, and then relax.
- Repeat up to 10 times and gradually build up the time you can hold it for. Aim to build up to 10 seconds of holding, 10 times.



Exercise 2 – the tilt



- Draw in the lower part of your tummy as in exercise 1.
- Tilt the small of your back into the bed (as if you are pulling your pubic bone up towards your ribs). This may also help to relieve back pain.
- Hold for 5 seconds, breathing normally, and then relax.
- Repeat 5 -10 times.
- Make sure your tummy stays in during this exercise. If you can't keep it gently in, go back to exercise number 1.

Exercise 3 – The gentle twist

- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Draw in the lower part of your tummy as in exercise 1.
- Slowly move your knees a few inches to the side, keeping them together. Keep your hips still and your stomach muscles drawn in. Bring your knees back to the middle, and then relax.
- Repeat to the other side.
- Repeat 5 -10 times on each side.

What Next?

Over the next six weeks try to increase your fitness with the exercises in this leaflet – pelvic floor muscle & tummy exercises

A short daily walk – gradually increase the distance

Swimming (once your bleeding has finished and stitches are healed)

Gentle pilates / yoga

Horse riding and gym work place more strain on your pelvic floor and stomach muscles. Make sure you feel strong enough to resume these activities.

Looking After Your Back And Posture

It is important to look after your back and your posture in the first weeks after birth. This is a common time to develop back pain. Be aware that your ligaments may still be softer for some time.

Stand and walk tall, with your tummy and bottom tucked in.

Standing Pelvic Tilt

This exercise may help if you have low back pain after having your baby. If your low back pain does not improve please contact the Pelvic and Maternal Health Physiotherapy Team.

- Stand with your back against a wall, feet out from the wall a little and knees soft.
- Gently tilt your hips (move your pubic bone towards your ribs). This should press the small of your back against the wall.
- Hold for 4 seconds, then relax.
- Repeat 6 times.

Looking after your Back and Posture

.Feeding your baby

Check that your back is supported, shoulders relaxed, and your feet can rest comfortably on the ground. A footstool may be useful.

Make sure that your baby is resting at a comfortable height for you.

When Luke was 3 days old, my neck and shoulders started to ache when I fed him. My midwife

showed me a better position with a pillow behind my back and the pain disappeared like magic.

New mum Marie and baby Luke.

.Changing a nappy and bathing your baby

Try to do this with your baby at waist height. If you are using a lower surface, it may help to kneel down. In the early weeks try not carry a baby bath full of water, as it can be very heavy.

I used to change my first baby, Bonnie, on the floor and I often had backache. With Jack I put the changing mat on the sofa or our bed, it's nice and safe and Bonnie loves to stand beside me and "help".

***Lucy, mum of Bonnie aged 22
months and baby Jack.***

Lifting

Try not to lift toddlers (or anything heavy) for the first 6 weeks. If you do have to lift, keep your back straight and bend your knees to kneel down.



Bring your toddler close to your body, draw in your tummy muscles and tighten your pelvic floor. Use your strong thigh muscles to stand up. Never lift when bending or twisting to the side.

Car Seats and Pushchairs

Avoid carrying the carseat with your baby in it where possible, as this can be very heavy. Choose a pushchair with handles at a comfortable height or adjustable handles.



How do I get back to having sex again?

- Sex is not just about intercourse. Find time to be physically close to your partner.
- Lubrication can make intercourse more comfortable (breastfeeding can make your vagina feel dry due to a change in your hormones). There are many available in the pharmacy, supermarket or other shops.
- If you have stitches wait until they have healed before attempting intercourse. Gentle massage to your scar can make it more comfortable once your stitches have healed.
- Try different positions for intercourse as this might make penetration easier and more comfortable.
- Be aware that you can still get pregnant if you are breastfeeding. Speak to your GP or health visitor about contraception.

Don't give up if sex is uncomfortable the first time, be patient and keep trying. Every woman should be able to return to normal sexual function. If you are having trouble don't be embarrassed, seek help from a healthcare professional.

We hope you find this information helpful

Please contact us if you experience any of the following:

Leakage of urine when you cough or sneeze, or other pelvic floor muscle problems

A sensation of 'something coming down' underneath

Weak tummy muscles

Persistent back or pelvic pain that interferes with your life.

For further information please contact:

The Pelvic and Maternal Health Physiotherapy Team
Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital
Telephone 01603 287 130 (24hr answer phone)

(You will need to see your GP for a referral if your baby is more than 3 months old).

Extra Advice After A Caesarean Section

It's normal to feel tired after your caesarean. The following exercises will help prevent complications in the first days after your surgery and help you to recover.

Deep breathing exercises – repeat EVERY hour that you are awake

These are important to keep your chest clear, and limit the stress of coughing on your tummy.

- Sit up supported in bed, shoulders relaxed. Bend your knees and support your lower tummy with your hands or a pillow.
- Breathe in deeply through your nose. Try to breathe right down into the base of your lungs, within comfort. You should feel your lower ribs moving out. Breathe out through your mouth.
- Repeat 3 times slowly.

If after doing this you feel that you need to cough up some mucous (phlegm), try the following:

- Take another breath in, and 'huff' the air out quickly and strongly (as you would do to mist up a mirror).
- If you feel you need to cough at this stage, keep supporting your tummy and try a gentle cough.
- Repeat this process once every hour, or more frequently if needed.

Please inform staff if you feel wheezy or are unable to clear your chest.

Circulation exercises - repeat EVERY hour that you are awake

These are important to help reduce ankle swelling and maintain blood flow.

- Circle your ankles 10 times.
- As soon as you are able, practice bending each knee up and down 3 times.

Getting Back to Normal Activities after Your Caesarean Section

Lifting

It is important that you avoid lifting anything heavier than your baby for the first six weeks. This includes vacuuming and lifting baby baths full of water.

Driving

Make sure you can safely do an emergency stop and are comfortable to be in control of your car. This includes getting your children in and out without hurting yourself. It is sensible to check with your insurance company before you drive.

Sex

Resume sex when you are ready. You may be more comfortable in a position that does not put pressure on your tummy.

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