

Maternity Services Women's and Children's Division

Postnatal Exercises

Introduction

Your body goes through many changes during pregnancy. Your posture changes, you have increased weight, and ligaments become relaxed making it easier to sustain injury. You may have had back or pelvic pain during pregnancy and received professional help. Please remember the advice that you were taught.

After giving birth these changes gradually return to normal. It is important you follow the advice and exercises in this handout to help your body to recover.

Bladder Care: It is important to pass urine within 4 hours, this will help prevent your bladder from overstretching or becoming damaged. The midwives may ask you to measure the urine the first few times. They will provide you with a jug for this if required.

Try to pass urine every 2-3 hours during the daytime when you are awake as your bladder may not tell you when it is getting full during the first week after delivery.

If you have difficulties:

- Passing urine
- Getting to the toilet in time
- Emptying your bladder
- Passing a good amount

Please seek assistance from the midwife or physiotherapist.

Swelling: If your ankles are swollen do some exercises to promote blood circulation hourly by bending your feet up and down for 30 seconds. Elevate your feet regularly.

If you are still experiencing symptoms of pain and/or problems with bladder control and emptying please try to ensure that you discuss this with your midwife or the physiotherapist prior to discharge.

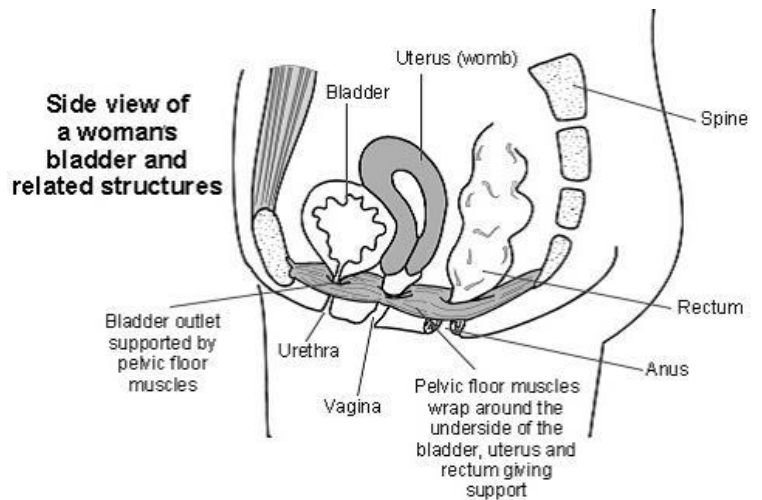
Pelvic floor muscles

Pelvic floor muscles act like a 'hammock' supporting your bladder and other internal organs from dropping down (prolapse). They also help control bladder and bowel function and prevent leakage of urine, wind or faeces.

Patient Information

It is important for you to practice pelvic floor exercises because during pregnancy these muscles become weakened from the weight of your baby bearing down. In a vaginal delivery these muscles stretch and weaken further as the baby passes through the pelvis.

There are two types of muscle fibre in the pelvic floor: the fast twitch fibres contract quickly to prevent leakage when coughing, laughing and sneezing; the slow twitch provide constant tone to support you through day and night.



Exercise 1: Pelvic Floor

A) Strengthening the 'slow' twitch fibres

- Squeeze the muscles around your back passage as if stopping yourself passing wind.
- Then lift the muscles up inside as if stopping yourself passing urine.
- Now hold. Initially you may only manage to hold for 2 seconds, but as you practice and get stronger the aim is to reach 10 seconds.
- Repeat 10 times.

B) Strengthening the 'fast' twitch fibres

- Squeeze and lift the muscles as above, as strong and fast as you can. Then relax.
- See how many you can do. The aim is to manage 10, initially you may reach 4 or 5 before the muscle tires, the muscle will get stronger with practice.
- If this is uncomfortable initially then do a gentle lift and let go, repeating 10 times.

Do not hold your breath, use your stomach muscles or buttocks.

No one should be able to see you exercising, so you can practice them whenever and wherever you like. However because these muscles are not visible it is easy to forget to exercise them.

We recommend you try to fit the exercises into your daily routine, for example every time you feed your baby. It may help to set an alarm on your phone or use a pelvic floor phone app like the "Squeezy App" to remind you. <http://www.squeezyapp.co.uk/index.html>

You should exercise your pelvic floor at least three times a day.

You need to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles in different positions; lying down, in sitting, standing up and walking.

To prevent leakage tighten these muscles before activities which put pressure on the pelvic floor for example when coughing, sneezing or picking up your baby.

Patient Information

Tummy muscles

The following exercises will help strengthen and tone your abdominal muscles, to help protect your spine and maintain a good posture.

Repeat each exercise 10 times, 3 x a day.

Exercise 2: Deep abdominal muscles

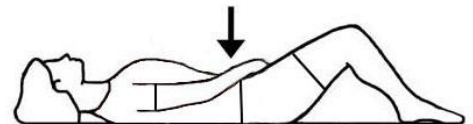
Lay on your back with your knees bent and head supported.

- Place your hands on your stomach below your belly button. Breathe in through your nose, breathe out gently through your mouth and gently draw your stomach in away from your hands towards your back.
- Keep your stomach pulled in. The aim is to hold for 10 seconds (or 3 breath cycles).
- Progress to do this exercise in sitting and standing.
- Use these deep abdominal muscles when doing activities that require effort such as lifting your baby.

Exercise 2 forms the base for the following exercises.

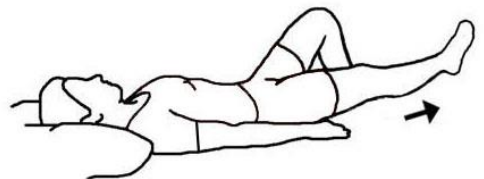
Exercise 3: Pelvic Tilt

- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Pull in your stomach, tighten your pelvic floor muscles and tilt your pelvis by gently flattening your back into the bed. Hold for 3- 5 seconds breathing normally, then relax.
- Progress by trying different positions such as sitting, standing, side lying.



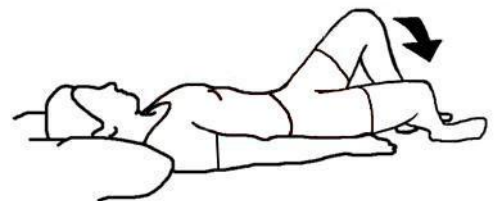
Exercise 4: Leg slides.

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Gently slide one leg out straight and return.
- Repeat with other leg.



Exercise 5: Single knee fall out

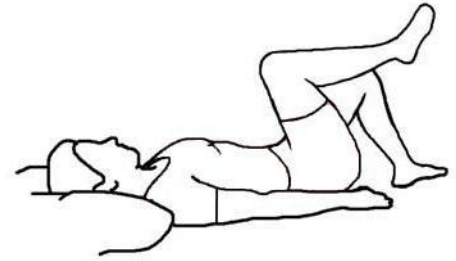
- Lie on your back with your knees bent, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Keeping your pelvis still and stomach pulled in, allow one knee to slowly drop out to the side.
- Slowly bring your knee back to the middle.
- Repeat with the other leg.



Patient Information

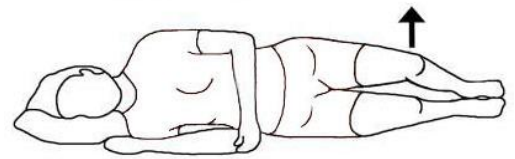
Exercise 6: Knee bends

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Slowly lift one leg up off the bed keeping your knee bent. Hold for 10 seconds, then slowly return to the starting position
- Repeat with the other leg.



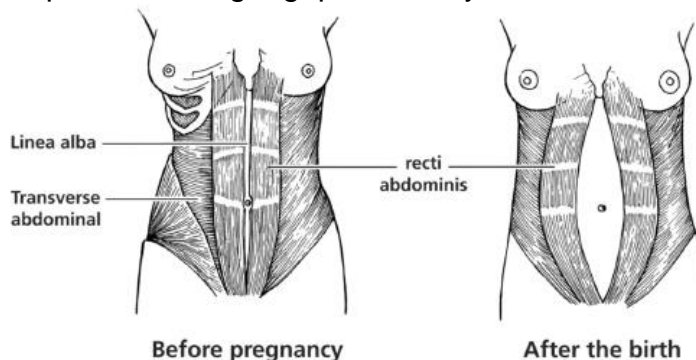
Exercise 7: Clam

- Lie on your side with knees bent and feet together, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Lift your top leg moving your knees apart but keeping your feet together, keep your pelvis still throughout. Hold for 5 seconds then slowly return to the starting position.
- Repeat with the other leg.



Separation of your stomach muscles:

As your baby grew during pregnancy your stomach muscles stretched, in most women the stomach muscles separate leaving a gap. Normally this is about 5cm wide and resolves after the birth.



If after 6 weeks you have a 2cm gap or more contact your women's health physiotherapist or ask for a referral from your midwife or GP.

The stomach muscles support your pelvic organs and your back. If separated, strength is reduced which can lead to back pain and incontinence.

To check your muscles -

- Lie on your back with knees bent up, feet flat on the bed. Place the fingers of one hand just above your belly button, palm facing you, press gently into your tummy.
- Pull in your stomach muscles and lift your head up, like a mini sit-up.
- You should feel two bands of muscle either side of your fingers tighten. Test how many fingers you can get between the bands of muscle.
- Separation of the abdominal muscles is also indicated if your tummy bulges forwards when you attempt a sit up. The deep abdominal muscles should help to prevent this from happening.

Patient Information

Only do the following exercise if you have a gap of two fingers width or less, if you have no abdominal bulge or the bulge can be controlled using the deep abdominal muscles from exercise 2.

Exercise 8: Tummy Flattener for separation of stomach muscles

- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Wrap a scarf around your waist crossed over the stomach
- As you breathe out, raise your head up whilst pulling the ends of the scarf to support your stomach muscles into the middle. Alternatively you can do this without a scarf by supporting the muscles with your hands.
- Return to lying flat.



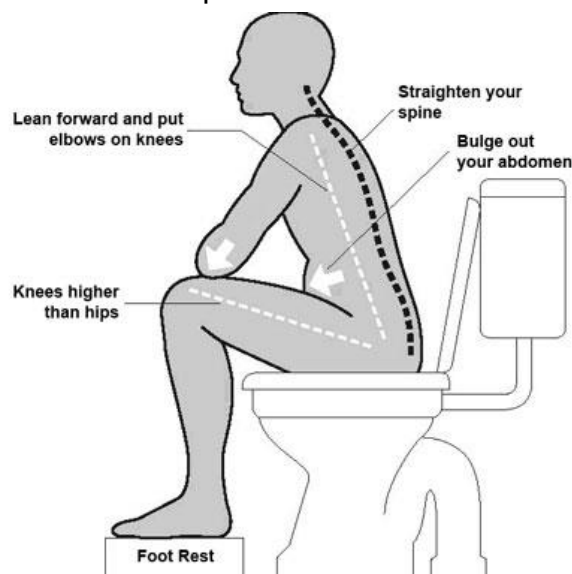
You need to work these muscles until they are tired, when you cannot hold your deep abdominal muscles anymore or your tummy starts to bulge forwards. You should increase the number of repetitions each day as your muscles get stronger.

Constipation: A lot of women find that they are constipated initially following delivery.

The following tips may help you deal with constipation:

- Try to drink at least 1-2 litres fluid daily.
- Try not to miss meals. Eat breakfast straight away after getting up to allow your digestive system time to work before you leave the house.
- Don't delay going to the loo once you have the urge to empty your bowels
- Don't rush give yourself time to go
- Exercise helps to stimulate digestion e.g. walking
- Ask your doctor about any medications you are prescribed. Some may be causing constipation, so you may need to make allowances for this.
- Avoid relying on laxatives; use for short term only.
- Sit on the toilet in a way that will support defecation as shown in picture:

1. Feet supported on a box 4-6 inches high
2. Lean forward
3. Relax pelvic floor muscles, breathe into your tummy and allow it to flop forward
4. Open mouth and grunt or say "idge" 3 times
5. Lean back, rest, lean forward and try again



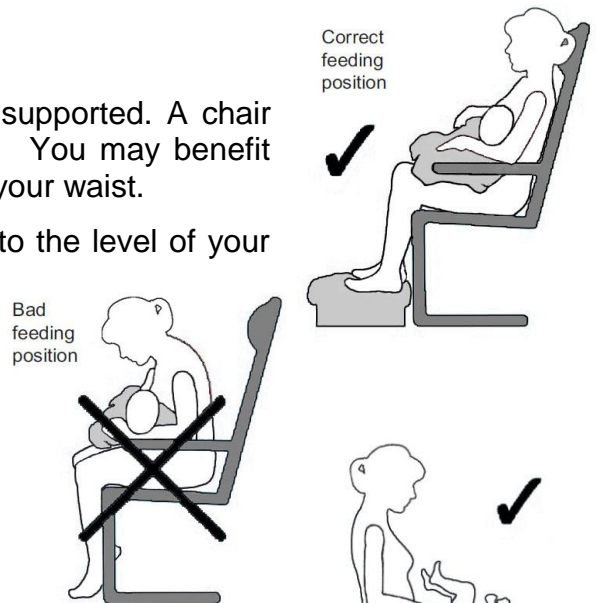
Patient Information

Going Home:

It is important to take good care of your back whilst looking after your baby. Try to stand up straight as much as possible.

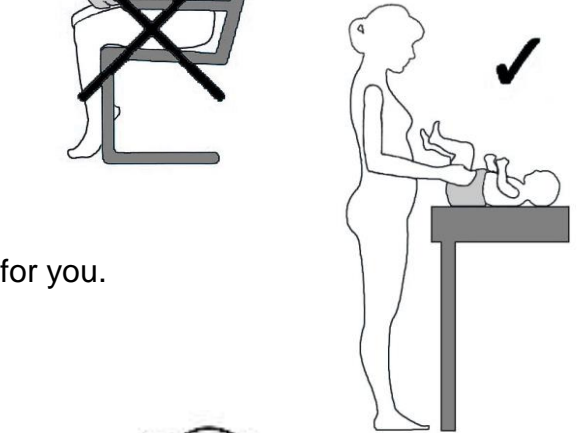
Feeding:

- Sit in a comfortable chair with your back well supported. A chair with arms may provide you with more support. You may benefit from having a thin pillow or folded towel behind your waist.
- Place pillows on your lap to bring the baby up to the level of your breasts to avoid slouching.
- Try to rest back when you're feeding and relax your shoulders.
- Lying on your side can also be a comfortable position for feeding.



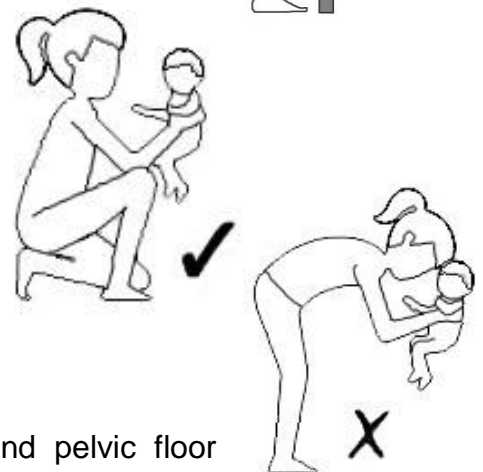
Changing and bathing:

- Adapt working surfaces to waist height to prevent you from stooping over and developing backache, e.g. changing tables.
- Bathe your baby on a surface at the right height for you.
- It will be easier to lift your baby from this height.



Lifting:

- To lift, pull in your stomach and pelvic floor muscles, bend from the knees and keep your back straight. Keep the load close to your body as you lift up.
- You should not lift your baby in a car seat; transport your baby in a pushchair.
- Avoid picking up younger children/toddlers; rather encourage them to climb up to you while you are sitting.



Housework:

- Avoid activities that cause strain to your abdomen and pelvic floor during the first few weeks, e.g. prolonged standing.
- Accept offers of help with housework
- In the first 6 weeks avoid hoovering and heavy lifting, e.g. a basket of wet washing.

Driving:

- Before the first journey check- Do you feel comfortable to drive? Can you concentrate? Can you do an emergency stop without any pain?

Patient Information

Returning to sport:

- It is safe to swim again following your six week check-up
- Low impact exercise is safe to resume after approximately 6-8 weeks, for example: pilates, yoga, gentle jogging, swimming, low resistance gym work
- High impact exercise such as aerobics, running, and resistance/weight training can be resumed gradually after 12 weeks.

Contacts/Further information

If you would like further information regarding the evidence printed in this leaflet please refer to:

www.nice.org.uk

www.csp.org.uk

www.rcog.org.uk

www.rcm.org.uk

www.squeezyapp.co.uk

or contact the physiotherapy department on 01245 514198.



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