

Get Fit for Motherhood

Physiotherapy Postnatal Exercises

After you have given birth, you will understandably want to give your baby lots of attention. Even so, it is important to make a little time for yourself. By regaining your fitness you'll feel good, have more energy and you could well avoid health problems in the future.

This leaflet offers guidance on safe and effective exercises for the pelvic floor and abdominal muscles.

Try to fit in a few exercises each day to help you get back into shape. The exercises should be easy to do, need little effort and you will soon see results.

If you've had a caesarean section, these exercises are still ideal. Just remember to start gently and progress slowly. If you should have a catheter, you may be comfortable starting your exercises after it has been removed.

Why is it important to exercise the pelvic floor muscles?

In these early days, gentle exercises for the pelvic floor muscles help to reduce the pain and swelling in the tissues after a vaginal birth.

In the long term, keeping these muscles strong will improve bladder and bowel control, safeguard against prolapse and contribute to healthy sex life. A good reason for all new mothers to exercise a little every day, now and for life!

Start in any comfortable position: sitting, lying down or when standing. Try to tighten the muscles around the back passage and work this feeling forwards into the vagina. You could try to imagine you are stopping yourself from passing wind or try to imagine you are 'tucking in your tail bone'.

The feeling of 'squeezing and lifting' internally is the basic pelvic floor contraction.

Start gently and always work with easy effort. Try not to tighten your buttocks, clench your jaw or hold your breath as you work these muscles. Work towards tightening the muscles and holding for a few seconds.

Don't worry if it is difficult to feel these muscles in the early days after the birth.

The exercises will become easier as you practise and as your body recovers.

What advice is important for bowel care?

It is important to avoid constipation. Straining to open your bowels puts pressure onto the pelvic floor and over time will weaken the vaginal tissues.

You may initially be more comfortable supporting the area between your legs with your hand/a pad of toilet paper while passing a motion, especially if you have had stitches. Or consider supporting the caesarean wound with your hands or forearm when opening your bowels.

A balanced diet with plenty of fresh ingredients and a fluid intake of 1½-2 litres a day will help to reduce the risk of constipation. The following tips may also be helpful to avoid straining:

- sit comfortably on the loo seat
- check that your knees are higher than your hips. A footstool may help
- rest your forearms onto your knees
- relax the pelvic floor muscles and the stomach wall. Try to widen your waist as you pass a motion
- relax your jaw and try not to hold your breath
- Grunt!



What can I do to tone my stomach muscles?

1. The 'deep' stomach exercise

Lie on your side as shown here:

- let your tummy sag! Breathe in gently
- as you breathe out, gently draw in the lower part of your abdomen (stomach) and hold for a few seconds while breathing normally
- let go and rest for a few seconds before repeating



Try to keep your back still while drawing in your stomach muscles. Progress the exercise and try to work your pelvic floor muscles at the same time (This is the basis for core stability /Pilates exercises so may be familiar).

Different starting positions to try:

- lying face down with a pillow under your stomach
- lying on your back, your knees bent



After 6 weeks you can progress to this position.

2. The 'pelvic tilt' exercise

- lie with your knees bent up
- gently draw in your lower abdomen, squeeze your pelvic floor muscles and gently tilt your pelvis. You should feel your back flattening into the bed
- hold this for a few seconds before releasing gently
- rest for a few seconds before repeating this exercise



3. The 'head lift' exercise

- draw in your lower abdomen and pelvic floor muscles tilt your pelvis as before, and tuck your chin to your chest
- lift your head a little way, hold for a few seconds and lower gently
- rest before repeating this exercise
- progress to lifting your head and shoulders, but only when you can keep your stomach braced and flat



How can I protect myself from back problems?

It is vital that you take care of your back after you had your baby. This part of your body will be vulnerable for five to six months after the birth because:

- your stomach muscles are weak
- your joints are more flexible due to the altered hormonal levels in your body and are at risk of damage
- caring for your baby will involve lifting, carrying, feeding and changing - all activities that will put extra strain on your back

When feeding:

Look after your back by always finding a comfortable, well supported position for feeding. A pillow under your baby may be helpful and a footstool may make you more comfortable.



When changing the baby:

Whether you stand, sit or kneel to change your baby, remember to try to keep your spine straight.

What should I consider when lifting?

Remember, whenever you are lifting, tighten your pelvic floor and 'deep' stomach muscles to protect your back and reduce the strain onto the pelvic floor.

Use your legs, bend your knees and get close to whatever you are picking up. Whenever possible, minimise the load.



When can I return to the gym or to sport?

Exercise should always be undertaken gradually after childbirth. It is important to regain fitness levels and it certainly helps to strengthen both the stomach muscles and pelvic floor muscles before returning to fitness activities.

However, never be tempted to do 'double leg raises' or 'sit ups' with straight legs as part of a workout. Many women choose to go back to the gym or resume a sport around three months after childbirth, but everyone is different. Progress at a pace that suits you.

Further Advice:

You should ask your midwife, health visitor or GP for advice if you have any of the problems below:

- persistent pain in back, pelvis, pubic bone, groin or stomach
- any problems with loss of bladder or bowel control such as wetting, soiling or having to rush to the toilet

Your GP may then refer you for physiotherapy treatment.

© Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust

Disclaimer

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is in no way intended to replace professional clinical advice by a qualified practitioner.

Ref number: 539

Publication Date: February 2013

Review Date: February 2015

If you do not understand this leaflet, we can arrange for an interpreter.

إذا كنت لا تستطيع فهم محتويات هذه النشرة فيمكننا عمل الترتيبات لتوفير مترجم شفوي لك.

এই পত্রিকাটি যদি আপনি বুঝতে না পারেন, তবে আপনাকে অন্য ভাষায় একজন অনুবাদকের সাহায্য করা দিবে।

如果你不明白本單張的內容，我們可安排口譯員服務。

如果你不明白本传单的内容，我们可安排口译员服务。

اگر مندرجات این جزوه را نمیفهمید، ما می‌توانیم مترجم در اختیارتان بگذاریم.

Jeśli masz trudności w zrozumieniu tej ulotki, możemy zorganizować tłumacza.



carer and patient information group approved