

Recovery advice and exercises following loss of your baby

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We appreciate that this is a very difficult time for you and that your own recovery may be the last thing on your mind at the moment. Your body will have changed a lot during pregnancy and it can take several months to recover fully. We hope that you find the following exercise and advice is helpful when the time is right. Listen to your body and start gently, gradually building up how many exercises you do.

Contents:

- Bowel care
- Pelvic floor muscle exercises
- Perineal pain relief
- Diastasis check for your stomach muscles
- Abdominal exercises
- Exercise and activity levels
- Looking after your back
- Returning to sex
- When and where to seek advice.

Top tips for the early days after delivery:

- Take your pain relief as recommended for as long as needed
- Start moving around short distances on the ward or at home
- Remember to wee every 2-3 hours, the sensation to pass urine may not return straightaway
- Do not put off opening your bowels: if you feel the sensation to go, go.
- Start gentle recovery exercises.

Bowel Care

After having perineal stitches it is common to be worried about opening your bowels. Try to:

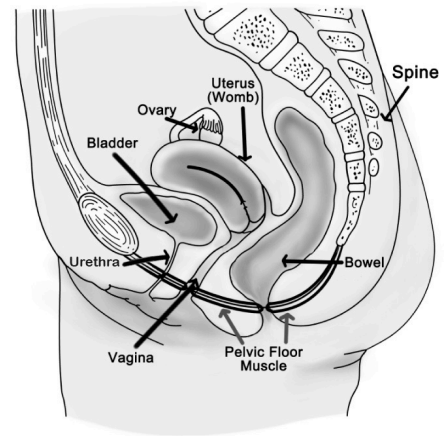
- Ensure good fluid intake; aim for at least 1.5-2 litres a day.
- Eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and fibre
- Don't delay, go to the toilet when you feel the urge to go
- Sit relaxed on the toilet, with your elbows on your knees. A footstool can be beneficial to raise your knees higher than your hips. **DO NOT STRAIN.**
- Use a clean maternity pad to support perineal stitches for comfort
- If you are still struggling to open your bowels, speak to your midwife or GP for laxatives.

The pelvic floor muscles

They are a group of muscles that span the outlet of your pelvis. They attach from the pubic bone at the front to the coccyx bone at the back, forming the floor of your pelvis.

The main functions of the pelvic floor are:

- Helps you control your bladder and your bowels
- Support your bladder, womb and bowel
- Improves sensation during sex.



How do I do my pelvic floor exercises?

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind and urine at the same time. You can also think of squeezing tight in the vagina. You should feel your pelvic floor muscles 'squeeze and lift'; try not to squeeze your buttocks and legs.

- They can be performed in any position, initially choose a position comfortable for you.
- As your muscles improve aim to do some of your exercises standing up.
- *Do not* hold your breath whilst doing your pelvic floor exercises. This is difficult at first but keep trying. Sometimes it helps to count out loud.
- *Do not* practise stopping the flow of urine mid-stream as this could affect your bladder function in the longer term.

How often should I do them?

Aim for:

- 10 short squeezes
- 10 long squeezes up to 10 seconds each
- 3-5 times a day.

It is important to remember that it may take several months for your pelvic floor muscles to become stronger and they need to be practised lifelong. Make your pelvic floor exercises part of your daily routine, just like brushing your teeth. This helps prevent bladder or bowel leakage or prolapse

Top tips to help you remember to do your pelvic floor exercises. Practise them when:

- Eating meals
- Cleaning your teeth
- Washing your hands
- Use a reminder app.

Look after your pelvic floor muscles by:

- Avoiding heavy lifting – if you need to lift something, tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you lift
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles as you cough and sneeze
- Avoid high impact and high intensity exercise until you feel you have regained full strength of these muscles. If unsure see a pelvic health physiotherapist
- Avoid straining when opening your bowels.

Perineal pain relief

Take your pain medication as prescribed by your midwife or doctor. This will help to keep you moving.

For vaginal pain relief:

- wet a clean maternity/sanitary pad and put it in a bag in the freezer
- Remove pad from the freezer
- Remove from bag and wrap in a damp cloth
- Place over your genital area for no longer than 5-10 minutes.

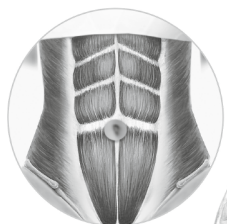
Do not do this if you have numbness in the saddle area as this could cause an ice burn.

Abdominal Muscles

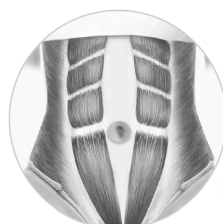
Your abdominal wall is made up of several layers of muscle designed to act like a corset. These muscles join at the front of your abdomen via a connecting strip. The muscles work together to support your abdominal organs and protect your spine.

What is Diastasis Rectus Abdominis?

During the later stages of pregnancy the abdominal wall has to expand. The stomach muscle does this by stretching and widening the connecting strip in the centre of your tummy, causing the two muscles to stretch apart.



Before Pregnancy



In the later stages of pregnancy

In most cases this gap will reduce within eight weeks. However, in some people it can remain longer term. This can cause weakness contributing to backache or pelvic pain and urinary incontinence.

How do I check for it?

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the bed
2. Place two fingertips above your belly button
3. Press gently downwards, then slowly raise your head off the pillow tucking your chin in towards your chest
4. You should feel the two sides of the stomach muscle clamping around either side of your fingers, with a softer centre. See how many fingers' width you can fit inside the gap. This is the size of your diastasis.

If you still have a gap of more than two fingers width, or abdominal pain, at eight weeks, speak to your GP to get referred to a physiotherapist.

Abdominal exercises

Your stomach muscles have been stretched during your pregnancy. It is important to encourage these muscles back to normal because they:

- Support your back
- Improve your posture
- Help to flatten your tummy.

It is important to work the deep muscles first before starting exercises such as sit ups. When these muscles are strong you can progress onto the other exercises.

For all the following exercises, lie down on your back (preferably on your bed if you cannot get down on to the floor comfortably), with your knees bent.

Stage 1 exercises: Can start as soon as you are ready

The deep tummy exercise

- Take a deep breath, and as you breathe out gently draw in the lower part of your stomach, as if you are trying to zip up a tight pair of trousers.
- Try to hold this position whilst breathing normally for a few seconds.
- As the muscles strengthen you can build up to a 10 second hold, repeated 10 times, several times each day.
- Once you have become confident at doing this, try performing this exercise and your pelvic floor squeezes at the same time whilst you do everyday activities such as carrying the laundry, picking up the shopping or when you sneeze.



Pelvic tilting

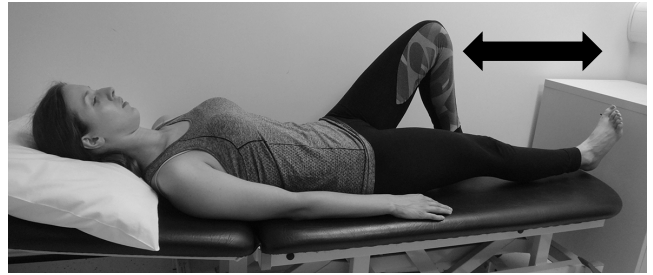
- Draw your tummy in and press the small of your back down, tilting your pelvis. Hold this position for a few seconds then gently relax to the start position.
- Repeat several times.
- This exercise can be performed in sitting and standing to relieve discomfort.



Stage 2 exercises: Able to start once stage 1 exercises are comfortable.

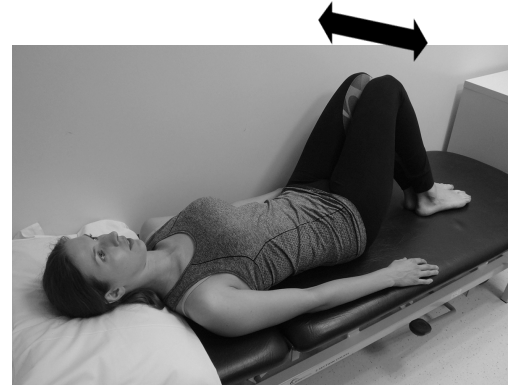
Leg slide

- Lie on your back as for pelvic tilting.
- Draw in your tummy muscles to keep your back steady. Whilst holding this position, slowly slide one leg until it is straight and resting on the bed.
- Return to the starting position by slowly bending your leg, then let your tummy sag.
- Repeat several times with each leg.



Knee rolling

- Lie on your back as for pelvic tilting.
- Draw in your tummy muscles, then slowly roll your knees gently to the right.
- Return to the middle and repeat to the left.
- Return to the middle and let your tummy sag.
- Repeat several times.



Exercise and activity levels

- Gradually increase your walking distance
- Swimming – once any bleeding has stopped
- Try walking up and down your stairs at home
- Choose low impact exercise classes
- Invest in a comfortable supportive sports bra
- Pick low impact exercise such as cycling instead of running

It can take several months for your body to cope with high impact exercise such as running – do not rush back too soon. If in doubt, ask your GP to refer you to a pelvic health physiotherapist to assess your pelvic muscles.

Looking after your back

It is important to look after your back after pregnancy. It is at risk because:

- Your abdominal muscles are weak. These normally help to support the spine
- Your joints are more flexible due to the increased amount of hormones in your body.

Lifting:

Try to avoid heavy lifting for the first six weeks. Whenever lifting:

- Bend your knees
- Bring the weight close to your body
- Tighten your pelvic floor and tummy muscles

- Use your thigh muscles to stand up
- Avoid lifting when bending or twisting.

Standing:

During pregnancy there are changes in your posture so make sure you stand and walk tall. Tuck your tummy and bottom in.

How do I return to sex?

It is normal to feel nervous about returning to sexual activity. You might feel too tired or lack the desire to.

- Don't put pressure on yourself to go straight back to sex, focus on being physically close to your partner
- Using a lubricant may make intercourse more comfortable
- If you have stitches wait until they have fully healed
- Massaging your perineal scar can ease tension in this area and make sex more comfortable.

When and where to seek advice

If you experience any of the following symptoms do not hesitate to contact your midwife or GP:

- Persistent numbness in the genital area
- Unable to empty your bladder for over six hours
- Dizziness and shortness of breath
- Either leg swelling, redness or a leg which is hot to touch
- Bowel leakage
- Bladder leakage
- Feeling of a lump in your vagina.

For more information contact;

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Team

Telephone: 01493 452378

Feedback

We want your visit to be as comfortable as possible. Please talk to the person in charge if you have any concerns. If the ward/department staff are unable to resolve your concern, please ask for our Patient Advice and Liaison (PALS) information. Please be assured that raising a concern will not impact on your care. **Before you leave the hospital you will be asked to complete a Friends and Family Test feedback card.** Providing your feedback is vital in helping to transform NHS services and to support patient choice.

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BEHAVIOURS:

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The hospital can arrange for an interpreter or person to sign to assist you in communicating effectively with staff during your stay. Please let us know.

For a large print version of this leaflet, contact PALS 01493 453240