

# Pelvic Health Physiotherapy

## Postnatal Exercises and Advice

Authors: Jenna Sweeney and Lorna Shailer,  
Pelvic Health Physiotherapists



James Paget  
University Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

Your body will have changed a lot during pregnancy and it can take several months to recover fully after birth. The following exercises and advice will help with your recovery. Listen to your body and start gently, gradually building up how many exercises you do.

### Contents

- Pelvic floor muscle exercises
- Pain relief
- Abdominal muscles
- Diastasis check
- Abdominal exercises
- Exercise and activity levels after birth
- Looking after your back
- Returning to sex

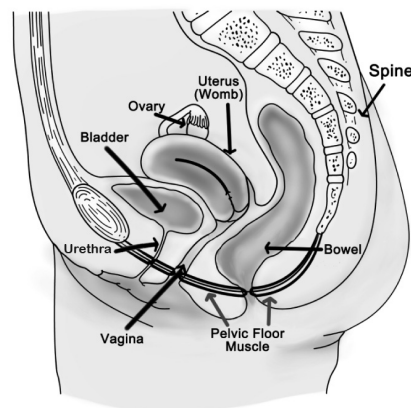
### Top tips for the first 24 hours after birth

- Start moving around short distances on the ward or at home
- Remember to wee every two to three 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
- Gently start your pelvic floor exercises

### 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



**One of the most common causes of a weak pelvic floor is childbirth but also pregnancy - this means it is important to do these exercises after all types of delivery.**

## How do I do my pelvic floor exercises?

Imagine 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:

- Short squeezes - 10 times
- 10 second squeeze -10 times
- Repeat this three to five times a day

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:

- Feeding your baby
- 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

## Pain relief

Take your pain medication as prescribed by your midwife or doctor. This will help to keep you moving and able to look after your baby.

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 five to 10 minutes

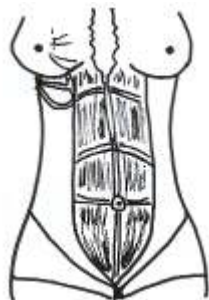
**Do not do this if you have numbness in the saddle area as this could cause an ice burn.**

## 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?

The abdominal wall has to expand to accommodate your growing baby. 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



At the end of pregnancy and after

In most cases this gap will reduce within eight weeks after you have given birth to your baby. However, in some ladies 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

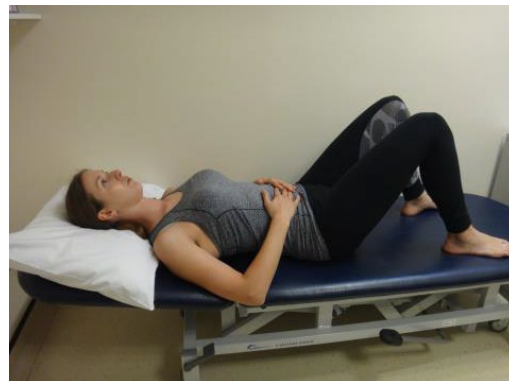
**It is important to work the deep muscles first before starting exercises such as sit-ups. When these muscles are strong you can progress on to the other exercises.**

The following exercises have been broken down to Stage 1 and 2.

**Stage 1 exercises:** Can start Day One postnatally.

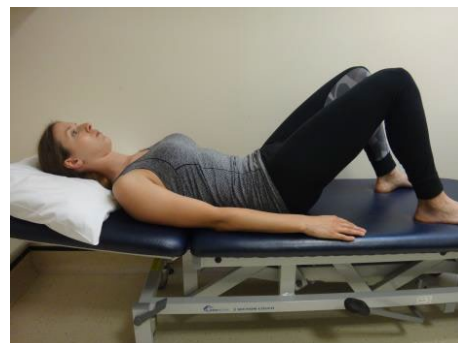
### 1. The deep tummy exercise

- You can do this exercise in any position
- As you breathe out gently draw in the lower part of your stomach
- Imagine you are trying to zip up a tight pair of trousers
- Breathe normally and try to hold this position for a few seconds
- As the muscles strengthen you can build up to a 10 second hold, repeated 10 times, several times each day
- Use this deep muscle with your pelvic floor muscles in everyday activities. Gently draw them in whilst carrying your baby, doing housework or when feeding your baby



### 2. Pelvic tilting

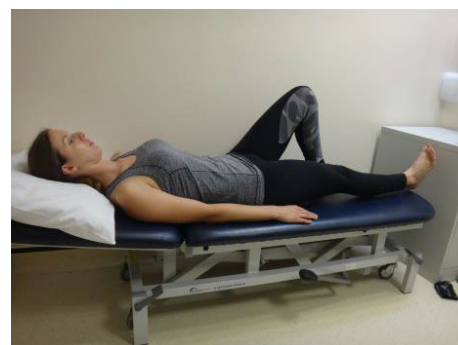
Lie on your back with your knees bent. Draw your tummy in and press the small of your back down, tilting your pelvis. Hold this position for a few seconds and let go gently. Repeat several times. This exercise can be performed in sitting and standing to relieve discomfort.



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

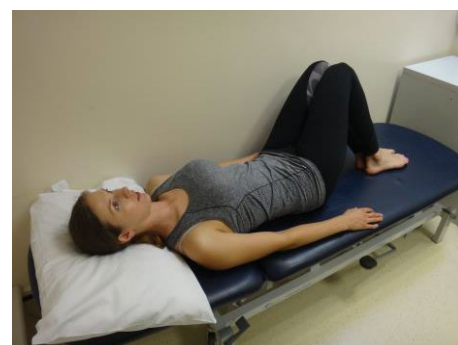
### 3. Leg slide

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.



### 4. 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 after birth

- Gradually increase your walking distance
- Swimming - once any bleeding has stopped
- Try walking up and down your stairs at home
- Choose low impact postnatal 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 you have had a baby. 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
- Babies require lifting and carrying, feeding and changing. These activities will all put a strain in your back

### Feeding posture

- Check that your back is supported
- Check that your feet are uncrossed and on the floor or a stool
- Have your baby and the supporting arm resting on a pillow
- Check that both your shoulders are relaxed and comfortable
- If you are uncomfortable feeding your baby please ask your midwife for advice

### Nappy changing

- Do not stoop. Use a surface which is level with your waist
- If changing your baby at a lower level or on the floor - kneel to protect your back

### 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

Now that the weight of your baby has gone your posture will have changed again. 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 after having a baby
- You might feel too tired, not find the time or lack the desire to
- Do not put pressure on yourself to go straight 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 or caesarean scar can ease tension in this area and make sex more comfortable

## 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.

**TRUST VALUES: We CARE for...**  
*our patients... each other... ourselves*

#### BEHAVIOURS:

**Courtesy and respect**

**Attentively kind and helpful**

**Responsive communication**

**Effective and professional**

**#Proud  
of the  
Paget**



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**