

## Fact Sheet

### Exercise before and after birth

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#### About this guide

The information and exercises in this booklet have been designed to keep you fit and comfortable during your pregnancy and to prepare your body for labour. After giving birth, they will help you to get your body back into shape and prevent future problems. None of the exercises should cause you pain. If you experience pain, or have any questions about the information in the booklet, please contact your physiotherapist, midwife or doctor.

#### Safe exercise during pregnancy

Exercise is good for everyone including pregnant women. As long as you have a healthy pregnancy without complications, now is a good time to start. If you have any concerns, please see your doctor.



Some general guidelines are:

- Start gently. Stop if any undue pain or discomfort occurs and consult a professional. The exercises in this booklet are safe to do throughout the pregnancy
- Walking, swimming, a stationary bike or low impact exercise classes are also examples of suitable exercise. Exercise for about 30 minutes on most days
- Wear cool, comfortable clothing and good supporting shoes and take water with you.
- Always warm up and cool down
- Exercise at a moderate intensity so that you feel puffed but are still able to hold a conversation.
- Use caution when participating in sports, especially if there is a risk of falling. It is better to avoid contact sport

#### Exercise after the birth

- It is safe to start the gentle exercises shown in this booklet soon after the birth. Try to attend the postnatal class if one is available or see your physiotherapist
- Walking is also an ideal exercise in the early postnatal time
- Resume your normal level of exercise slowly and progress gradually at your own pace within limits of comfort and fatigue
- Exercise in water may begin after stitches have healed and vaginal discharge has finished (often about 6 weeks)
- Stronger exercise such as low impact exercise classes can usually be started after about 6 weeks (sometimes longer after caesarean birth).
- Aim for 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on most days
- Always warm up and cool down and don't forget to take water with you
- Avoid exercise that causes pain or strains muscles and joints. High impact exercise such as jogging and netball should only be resumed when your back and pelvic floor feel strong again. This may take several months
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### Exercises to prevent or ease neck and back pain

#### Rotation stretch

- Turn your head to look over one shoulder, until you feel a gentle stretch in your neck
- Repeat on the other side



#### Side stretch

- Tilt one ear towards your shoulder, until you feel a gentle neck stretch
- Repeat on the other side



### Chin Tuck

- Keeping your head level, tuck your chin in as if making a double chin. Hold briefly and release.



### Upper Back Stretches

Stand with an upright posture or sit with good back support, hold each stretch for about 10 seconds

- Stretch one arm up towards the ceiling and at the same time stretch the other arm down towards the floor. Gently bend sideways from the waist taking the upper arm over your head. Repeat for the other side



- Stretch both arms out in front, clasping hands together. Reach out further to feel the stretch across your upper back.



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- Clasp hands together behind your back. Stretch shoulders down and back so that the shoulder blades squeeze together.



- Sit with good low back support. Turn the upper body towards one side, grasping the back of the chair with the opposite hand to stretch the middle and upper back. Repeat for the other side.

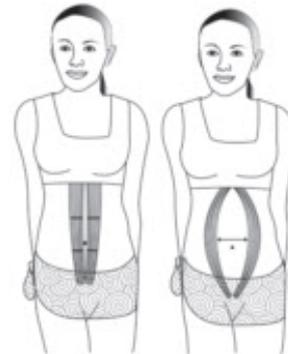


### Abdominal muscle separation

Your abdominal muscles are made up of several layers that run like 2 sheets from your ribs to your pelvis and are joined together down the midline.

During pregnancy the midline tissues stretch and often separate to allow room for your growing baby. If this separation is wide, it can lead to pain in the pelvis and back.

After giving birth, your muscles are usually separated. Correct exercises may help the muscles return together in a firmer, flatter fashion. This could take several weeks or months.



### How to measure abdominal muscle separation

- Lie on your back with knees bent, and a pillow under your head
- Place fingertips sideways (to measure "width") just above the belly button
- Raise your head and shoulders gently off the pillow
- Dig your fingers in and measure the separation between your tummy muscles eg. 2 finger widths apart
- If the separation is wide (greater than 2-3 fingers), you may be advised to wear an abdominal support to protect your back until the muscles return together.



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### Abdominal exercises

#### Tummy tuck (bracing)

- Place your hands on your lower tummy, just inside your hip bones.



- Keep breathing normally and gently draw your tummy in, away from your fingertips
- Hold for a few seconds and then relax
- You can do this exercise while standing, sitting, lying or on hands and knees.



- Try to do this regularly throughout the day, particularly whenever you do activities which may strain your back or tummy such as getting in and out of bed, housework and lifting.

#### Pelvic tilt

- Stand with your feet comfortably apart and knees slightly bent
- Place one hand on your lower tummy and the

other in the arch of your back

- Tuck your tummy in as you tilt your pelvis and flatten the arch of your back
- This can be done in lying, sitting or on hands and knees.



### Back exercises

All these exercises are done on your hands and knees.

#### Cat Stretch

- Tighten your stomach as you gently arch your back upwards
- Hold this position for 10 seconds then relax.



#### Arm lift

- Tighten your stomach and slowly lift one arm out in front of you as far as you are able
- Repeat for the other arm.



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### Leg lift

- Tighten your stomach and slowly lift one leg behind you, keeping the knee bent
- Repeat for the other leg
- As you improve with practice, you can extend one leg behind you with the knee straight.



### Middle back stretch

- Tighten your stomach, stretch one arm up to the ceiling, then sweep it down and behind the other arm. Turn your head to look at that hand
- Relax and repeat with the other arm.



### Leg exercises

#### Calf stretch

- Stand with one leg behind, keeping the knee straight and the heel on the ground
- Gently bend your front knee, placing your weight on the front leg until you feel a stretch in the calf of the back leg
- Hold this position for 10 seconds then relax.
- Repeat for the other side.



### Pelvic floor exercises

It is very important for you to exercise the pelvic floor muscles during your pregnancy, and to continue these exercises after the birth of your baby. The pelvic floor muscles surround your urethra (front passage), vagina and anus (back passage) and help to support the pelvic organs. They form a sling running from the pubic bone at the front to the tailbone at the back. If these muscles are weak, you may lose control of your bladder or bowel, experience the sensation of “something coming down” into the vagina, or you may experience decreased sexual sensation.

#### How to exercise pelvic floor muscles?

- A pelvic floor exercise is just a squeeze and lift of the muscles as if you are holding on to wind or a “wee”
- Before your baby is born, you may be able to hold the muscles tight for up to 10 seconds. After the birth, you may find you can only hold the muscles tight for 2 – 3 seconds
- In the first few days, try a few gentle pelvic floor squeezes regularly to ease pain and aid healing.

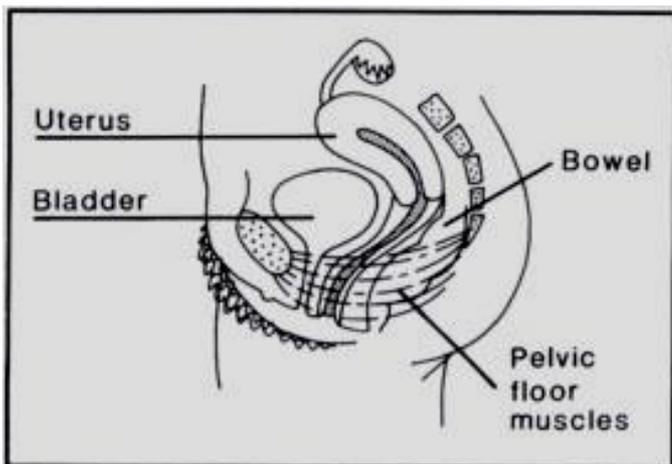
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- Once you feel comfortable, try to squeeze as strongly as possible and hold for as long as you are able. Do a tummy tuck at the same time as these muscles work together
- Repeat as many times as you can, resting for a few seconds between each squeeze.

Each time you do your exercises, try to do this same number of pelvic floor exercises in a row. Also try to do as many quick squeezes as slow ones.

- Repeat this at least 3 times every day in any position, but make sure you don't hold your breath
- Gradually progress your exercises, aiming to reach 10 repetitions of 10 seconds, plus lots of quick squeezes. Once the muscles feel strong and you have good bladder control, you can do your exercises once per day
- Remember to squeeze your pelvic floor muscles and tummy tuck before you cough, sneeze, lift or when you are trying to put off going to the toilet
- If you are experiencing any problems, contact the Obstetric Physiotherapist at your hospital.



### Good bladder and bowel habits

- Drink about 2 litres (6-8 glasses) of fluid a day, 2.5 litres (10 glasses) if you are breast feeding.
- Limit caffeine drinks such as tea, coffee or cola as these can irritate the bladder and cause dehydration. Water is best
- Don't empty your bladder "just in case", wait until you feel comfortably full (except before bed) Don't rush, stay there until you feel completely empty
- Avoid constipation and straining when you empty your bowels as this can damage the pelvic floor muscles and lead to weakness
- Empty your bowels when you feel the urge Don't put it off
- Eat lots of fibre – fruits, vegetables, wholemeal breads and cereals.

### How to sit on the toilet

- Always sit on the toilet - don't hover.
- Lean forward with legs apart but keep the back straight (Figure 1).
- When opening your bowels, raise your heels or use a foot stool so that the knees are higher than the hips (Figure 2).
- Don't strain - instead bulge your belly forwards like a basketball as this allows your pelvic floor to relax.



Figure 1



Figure 2

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### Back Care

During pregnancy, your back and pelvis are not as stable as usual due to hormonal changes that prepare you for labour. The effects of these hormones remain in your system after you give birth, often for several months. Back pain is a common discomfort during this time, but can be prevented by good posture and taking care to bend and lift correctly.



*Stand tall with your lower tummy slightly tucked in. Gently pull your shoulders down and back. If you need to shift your weight, rock forwards and backwards rather than side to side.*

When sitting, choose a chair that gives firm back support. Sit with your bottom all the way to the back of the chair and use a rolled up towel in the arch of your back to support the natural curves. When breastfeeding, use a small foot stool and support your arm on a pillow to ensure that you don't slouch. Don't forget, bring baby to breast rather than breast to baby.

When standing up from a chair, tuck your tummy in, lean forward at the hips, keeping your back straight, and push up through your thighs.



Avoid awkward or heavy lifting during pregnancy and the early postnatal period. When lifting, bend your knees and not your back. Hold the object close, tighten (brace) your pelvic floor and tummy muscles and push through the legs to stand up.



Take care of your back during housework and when caring for your baby, eg rest the basket on a high surface when hanging out the washing, make sure the change table is waist height, bend your knees and keep your back straight if you have to vacuum, use a baby carrier or pram rather than a capsule to carry your baby and adjust the carrier so your back is straight.

When getting in and out of bed, bend your knees up, and roll onto your side. Then lower your legs off the bed and push up through your elbow to get into a sitting position. This is especially important if you have had a caesarean birth. Don't forget to tighten (brace) your tummy muscles as you move.

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**Care after caesarean birth**

Even though you will feel sore after caesarean birth, it is important for you to get out of bed and start moving around as soon as possible. Whilst still in bed, perform gentle foot exercises to assist with circulation.

If you need to cough, bend your knees up and support your wound with your hands, a folded towel or pillow.

Get out of bed by rolling onto your side so that you don't strain your wound



Two gentle exercises that are safe and important for you to start within the first few days are:

- Tummy tucking (see page 4)
- Pelvic floor exercises (see page 5)

Gradually commence other exercises such as the exercises in this booklet and walking. You can start to do stronger exercises at about 6-8 weeks but avoid high impact exercises (eg jogging, aerobics) until your back and pelvic floor feel strong again. This may take several months.

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Avoid any activity that feels like it's straining your wound, such as lifting heavy weights, vacuuming and reaching up high, for at least six weeks.

Most women find that they are uncomfortable driving for the first 2 - 3 weeks following a caesarean birth. While there is no restriction imposed on driving by the Roads & Traffic Authority (RTA), it is safer to delay driving until you feel that you can steer and put your foot on the brake firmly without discomfort.

Try to make a special effort to attend the physiotherapy postnatal class or speak to a physiotherapist before you leave the hospital, especially if you have any back problems or are worried about weak abdominal muscles.

#### **Rest and relaxation**

It is very important to rest during your pregnancy and in the early postnatal period. During pregnancy avoid lying flat on your back. It is better to rest lying on your side or supported by a few pillows.

After the birth, a good position for rest is lying face down with pillow(s) under your tummy. This is especially helpful for your back and pelvic floor. After a caesarean birth, wait until the wound is more comfortable.



**If you have any questions or problems, please contact the obstetric physiotherapist at your hospital.**

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