

Returning to fitness after childbirth

This leaflet is designed for all women or birthing people, whether you have given birth vaginally or by Caesarean birth. Please ring 0118 322 7811 or 7812 to speak to a pelvic health / maternity physiotherapist at the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

Introduction

During pregnancy your body has undergone many changes to adapt to your growing baby: pelvic joints became looser and your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles were stretched, and this may have resulted in changes to your posture. Although you cannot expect to return to your normal fitness and figure immediately, there is a lot you can do now to help your recovery. Doing these safe exercises and following the advice in this leaflet will help you to regain your fitness, feel good, have more energy and possibly avoid problems developing.

Rest

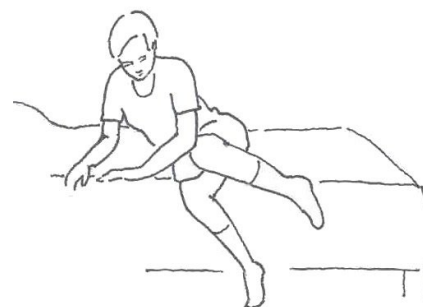
It is important to get plenty of rest, especially in the early days; this will help your body recover. If you have learnt a method of relaxation, use it! Fit your sleeping sessions in around your baby's sleeps.

Circulation

During the first few days following your baby's birth your circulation may be affected. Try to avoid prolonged standing or crossing your legs when sitting or lying. If your ankles are swollen, try having your legs up and supported. Circling your feet at frequent intervals will help lessen the swelling.

Getting out of bed

It is important to avoid putting too much pressure on your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles while they heal. The best way to get out of bed during this time is to bend both knees, keep your feet on the bed and roll onto your side. From this position sit up by pushing up through your arms as you drop your legs over the edge of the bed; reverse this process when getting into bed.

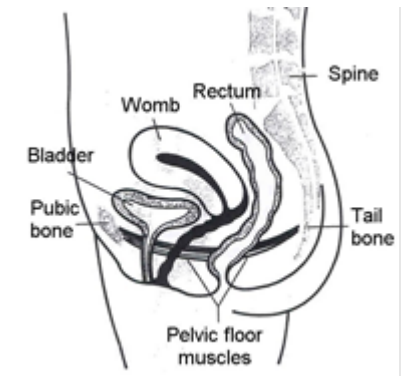


Pelvic floor muscles

These are the sling of muscles that lie underneath the bladder and bowels which, when contracted, tighten around the back, vaginal and urethral passages. They support the internal organs and help control the bladder and bowels.

During pregnancy and vaginal delivery these muscles are put under considerable strain. Even if you have stitches in your perineum (the area between your vagina and anus) and/or haemorrhoids (piles) you should still start practising these exercises on day one. If you have a catheter in, then wait until the catheter has been taken out and you have passed a normal volume of urine before starting these exercises.

Gentle rhythmic tightening and relaxing of these muscles will help to ease pain and swelling by encouraging blood flow to the area.



Exercise 1 ‘Slow ones’ (these also help with urge incontinence and urgency)

- You should begin exercising your pelvic floor lying on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the bed.
- Tighten the back passage as if trying to hold in wind and then bring this contraction forward as if trying to hold in a tampon or stop urine.
- Do not use your tummy or bottom muscles when doing this exercise. You should not see any external movement.
- Aim to hold this contraction for 3-5 seconds. Build up strength within your pelvic floor until you can hold for 10 seconds.
- Keep breathing throughout and then relax your pelvic floor for at least 5 seconds in between each contraction.

Exercise 2 ‘Quick ones’ (these can also help with stress incontinence)

- You should begin exercising your pelvic floor lying on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the bed.
- Tighten the muscles as above.
- Hold for 1 second and relax for 1 second. Repeating 10 times.

Try to build these exercises into your routine, for example, while feeding or changing your baby. Try to use these muscles to support you by tightening them before you cough, sneeze, lift baby, or stand from sitting - this is a habit for life.

**** Repeat each exercise (slow and quick) 10 times, 3-4 times a day.**

Further hints

- Make sure you have passed urine within 6 hours of your baby’s birth or of your catheter being taken out. If you have not passed urine, inform your midwife.
- Supporting your perineum/stitches with a clean pad or toilet paper will ease discomfort when you open your bowels.
- Avoid constipation! Drink at least 3-4 pints of water per day and have plenty of fibre in your diet.
- Practising the pelvic floor exercises in a warm bath may ease any discomfort.
- Crushed ice, frozen peas or a wet, frozen sanitary towel wrapped in a damp paper towel and

applied to the perineum for about 10 minutes may ease swelling and bruising – but do not sit on your ice pack.

Abdominal muscles

The abdominal muscles form a corset that helps to support your back. These muscles are stretched during pregnancy and therefore are weakened. It is important not to try to do strong exercises until you have good control as this may strain your back. These exercises will help strengthen your abdominal muscles and prevent or relieve backache.

All exercises should be repeated up to 10 times with a short rest between each exercise, 3 times a day.

Exercise 1 (Core exercise)

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet resting on the bed. Take a breath in, and then as you breathe out gently draw your lower abdomen in towards your spine.
- Try to hold this while continuing to breathe, and then relax.
- Try to increase the hold until you can hold for the count of 10 and repeat 10 times;
- Always draw these muscles in to support you when you are doing any abdominal exercises and in any activity involving your back e.g. lifting anything, including your baby; rising from sitting; getting out of bed; and bending over. This is another good habit for life.

Exercise 2 (Pelvic tilting)

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet resting on the bed, draw in your lower abdomen, as in exercise 1.
- At the same time tuck your tailbone under, flattening the curve of your lower back.
- Keep breathing while holding this position for a few moments and then relax.
- This exercise can be done at any time and is also very good for easing an aching back.

Exercise 3 (Knee rolling)

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet resting on the bed, draw in your lower abdomen, as in exercise 1.
- Slowly lower both knees to one side and continue to breathe whilst doing this.
- Bring your knees back to the middle and relax.
- Draw your abdomen in and repeat this time taking your knees to the other side.
- This exercise can also help relieve wind following a Caesarean birth.

Exercise 4

(Do not do this exercise if you notice any bulging of your abdominal muscles, just do exercises 1-3 until you are able to do this exercise without your abdomen bulging)

- Draw in your lower abdomen as in exercise 1 and hold it in while continuing to breathe.
- Reach your hands towards your feet, lifting your head just off the pillow to look at your knees.
- Hold the position for 2-4 seconds.



- Your abdomen should remain flat throughout this exercise and you should continue to breathe.
- Lower your head back to the pillow and relax.

These exercises will help strengthen your abdominals and correct any gapping in the front of the abdominal muscles.

- **Do not** lift both legs up straight at the same time when lying on your back.
- **Do not** do sit ups from lying flat on your back.

Exercising after birth

It is important to return to exercise gradually; it should be enjoyable! Walking is an excellent way to exercise, as is swimming, which can be started when the vaginal bleeding has finished and stitches have healed. Ask at your local leisure centre about aqua natal or postnatal exercise classes; these types of classes are suitable from six weeks after the birth, but always listen to your body and take rests when required. Remember the hormones of pregnancy remain for up to 6 months after the birth, therefore it is important not to start impact activity, such as jogging and aerobics, too soon. Yoga and Pilates may be an early alternative.

You may want to wear an abdominal support during activities for the first 6 weeks.

Back care

It will be three to five months before your pelvic joints are completely restored to their pre-pregnancy state and during this time your back remains vulnerable to strain.

To help look after your back try to ensure you:

- Sit right back in your chair so your back is supported and with your feet flat on the ground, especially when feeding your baby. Sitting on the edge of the bed is not a good position.
- Having a pillow on your lap when feeding will bring baby up to you so that you do not have to lean down and strain your back.
- Avoid twisting movements.
- Sit, stand and walk tall.
- Make sure when you are changing baby, baby is at a height that is comfortable for you, try to avoid stooping.
- Bend your knees not your back when lifting. Remember to draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominals to avoid straining your back. When lifting hold what you are lifting in front and close to you, not on one hip. You may find it helpful to use a baby carrier or sling to hold and support baby in a centred position if you find you are holding them on your hip or to the side.



Caesarean birth

All the above advice applies to you, however having had an abdominal operation your return to fitness will be slower. Do not expect too much of yourself too soon. There are several layers of stitches inside your abdomen that should not be put under strain, so listen to your body and gradually increase your activities as you feel able. The following extra advice may be of help.

- Take pain relief regularly as long as necessary – you will feel better and be able to move more easily.
- If you need to cough, sneeze, etc. in the early days, bend your knees or lean forward and hold your scar.
- Exercises 1, 2 and 3 can be started from day 1.
- When you get home: you should make the most of all available help. Do nothing strenuous during the first 4-6 weeks after the operation, then gradually increase your activity and work load over the next 4-6 weeks. Avoid activities that may cause strain such as prolonged standing, vacuuming or carrying a large amount of wet washing.
- Try to let your baby be the heaviest weight you lift for the first few weeks; if you have a toddler encourage him/her to climb up to you.
- Do not drive for 4-6 weeks. When you do feel fit to drive sit in a stationary car and test your ability to use all the controls. Go for a trial drive with another driver.
- Progressing to more strenuous activities will depend on when you feel ready. You may swim after your postnatal check but try to avoid impact exercises for at least 12 weeks.
- Do not wear any abdominal support or tubigrip until your dressing has been removed.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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