

Exercises and advice following the loss of your baby

This leaflet is designed for women who have suffered the loss of a baby during pregnancy or soon after birth. It contains safe and effective exercises and advice to help your physical recovery. It will take time but there are things which will help your physical recovery. Right now, your own recovery may not be a priority for you. We hope the information in this leaflet will be helpful to you when the time is right for you.

These exercises can be built up gradually and you can start at home or in the hospital. If you are unsure whether an activity is suitable for you, speak to your midwife or physiotherapist.

Section 1: Advice for your comfort

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, please use this to help. If you feel you want to sleep all of the time or feel psychologically unable to get out of bed or cope, please contact your GP or SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death charity – contact details at the end of the leaflet).

Getting in and 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.



Sitting

Ensure you are well-positioned in your chair or bed. A small pillow or folded towel in the base of your back will support you and may relieve backache. Your feet should reach the floor. If they don't, try using a footstool.



Section 2: Advice for activity in the early days

Circulation

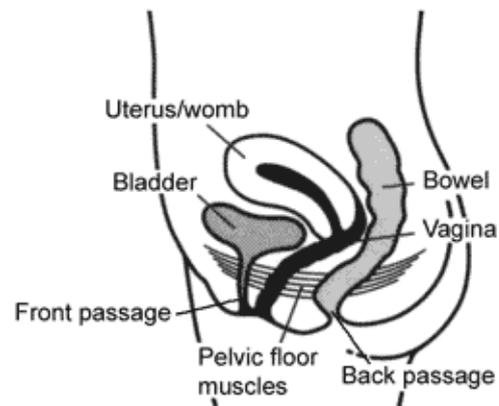
During the first few days your circulation may be affected. Try to avoid prolonged standing or crossing your legs when sitting or lying. If your ankles are swollen try having your legs up and supported. Circling your feet at frequent intervals will help lessen the swelling.

Pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor muscles are sling-like muscles that lie at the base of the pelvis, supporting the internal organs. Exercising the pelvic floor helps to support the uterus and improves control of bladder and bowels.

If you have a catheter, wait until it is removed and you have passed urine normally before starting the pelvic floor exercises.

Try and practise the two types of pelvic floor exercises, as below.



'Slow ones'

- You should begin exercising your pelvic floor lying on your side with knees bent.
- Tighten the back passage as if trying to hold in wind and then bring this contraction forward as if trying to 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 6 seconds in between each contraction.
- To progress this, try tightening the muscles in sitting and then in standing positions.

'Quick ones'

- Like the above exercises, but tighten the muscles as tight as you can.
- Hold for 1 second and relax for 1 second. Repeat this 10 times.
- To progress this, try tightening the muscles in sitting and then in standing positions.

Try to build these exercises into your daily routine if you can. Practise tightening these muscles before you cough, sneeze, or stand from sitting - this is a habit for life.

Repeat each exercise (slow and fast) 10 times, at least 3 times a day.

Abdominal muscles

The abdominal muscles form a corset that helps to support your back. These muscles can be stretched during pregnancy. Strengthening the abdominal muscles help you to support your back and uterus. You can sometimes notice a bulge in the abdomen when sitting up from the bed. If you notice this, speak to your GP or Women's Health Physiotherapist.

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

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; rising from sitting; getting out of bed; and bending over. This is another good habit for life.

Pelvic tilting

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet resting on the bed, draw in your lower abdomen, as in the core exercise.
- 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.

Crunches

(Do not do this exercise if you notice any bulging of your abdominal muscles)

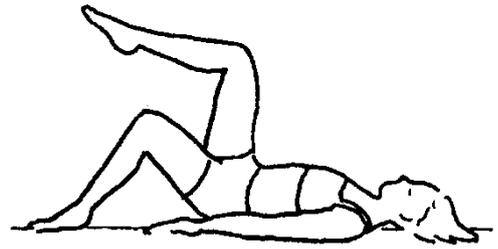
- Draw in your lower abdomen as in exercise 1 and hold it in while continuing to breathe.
- Reach your hands towards your feet, lifting your head just off the pillow to look at your knees.
- Hold the position for 2-4 seconds.
- Your abdomen should remain flat throughout this exercise and you should continue to breathe.
- Lower your head back to the pillow and relax.
- **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.



Section 3: Advice for activity from 6 weeks

Knee bends

- Starting lying down with your knees bent and your feet flat.
- Draw in your belly button towards your spine and hold it while bending one hip and knee up towards your chest as far as is comfortable.
- Hold up for the count of 10 and then slowly bring the leg down so the foot is resting back on the bed.
- Repeat this with the other leg, continuing to breathe throughout the exercise.

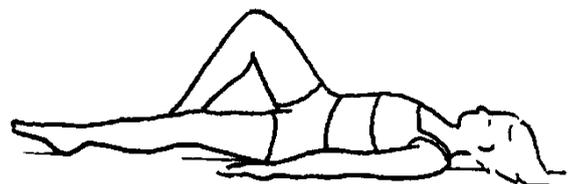


Knee fall outs

- Start lying down with your knees bent and your feet flat.
- Draw in your belly button towards your spine and hold it there.
- Slowly let one knee fall out to the side. Keep breathing and use your abdominal muscles to keep the opposite leg still.
- Slowly bring the knee back up, keeping the other leg still and continuing to breathe.
- Repeat this with the other leg making sure you keep your abdominal muscles drawn in to support you at all times.

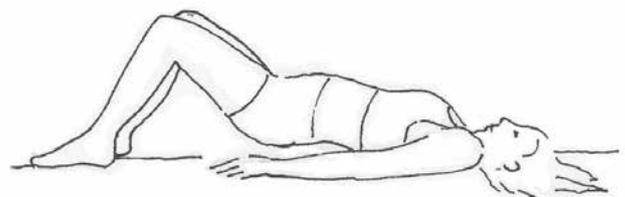
One leg stretch

- Start lying down with your knees bent and your feet flat.
- Draw in your belly button towards your spine and hold.



Bridging

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet flat.
- Draw your belly button in towards your spine and hold it there.
- Squeeze your bottom muscles and tuck your bottom under, slowly rolling up into the bridge position.
- Continue to breathe and then slowly roll back down, trying to move the spine segment by segment.
- To progress this exercise, hold in a bridge position for 2-4 seconds, but remember to use your abdominals to support you.



Section 4: Exercises from 12 weeks

Sit ups

- Start lying down with your knees bent and your feet flat, with two pillows supporting your head and your arms down by your side.
- Draw in your belly button towards your spine and hold it there.
- Reach your hands towards your ankles using your tummy muscles to bring your head off the ground. Hold the position for 2-4 seconds then slowly lower your head and relax.
- Your abdomen should stay flat while you are doing this exercise and you should continue to breathe.
- To progress this exercise, remove one pillow and continue as above. You should not get any neck pain or abdominal bulging when doing this exercise. If you do, stop and review the exercise with your physiotherapist.

Cross abdominal sit ups

- Start lying down with your knees bent and your feet flat.
- Draw in your belly button towards your spine and hold it there.
- Reach your right hand towards your left knee using your tummy muscles and continuing to breathe.
- Lower back down and relax. Then repeat on the other side. To progress this exercise, try holding for 2-4 seconds then lower head down.

The above exercises should not be painful and should not create any doming or bulging in the abdominal area. If you have any concerns please ring 0118 322 7818 to speak to a Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Section 5: Regaining your physical wellbeing

Returning to exercise

It is important to return to exercise gradually, listening to your body, and should be enjoyable. Walking is an excellent way to exercise, as is swimming, yoga and Pilates. You can start swimming once you have had seven consecutive days clear from vaginal bleeding/discharge. If you have had a Caesarean wait until your 6-week GP check.

Remember the pregnancy-related hormones can still affect your body for up to 6 months. Therefore it is important not to start high-impact activity, such as jogging and aerobics, too soon.

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

Sexual intercourse

Many women find it difficult to return to sexual activity following the loss of their baby. If there are no physical problems you can resume intercourse when you are ready. Start gently and use lubrication if required.

If you have persistent discomfort, pain or difficulties returning to sexual activity, seek further help from your GP.

Section 6: Further contacts

Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust
Women's Health Physiotherapy Department
Royal Berkshire Hospital,
London Road, Reading RG1 5AN
Tel: 0118 322 7818

As parents you will be feeling many different emotions and this is quite normal. Talking about how you feel can sometimes help although you may not feel comfortable talking to close relatives and friends about this. If you would like to talk to someone, ask your Community midwife or contact the Bereavement Midwife who will be able to help you with the practical arrangements and may be contacted once you have gone home. Alternatively, you can speak to the charity Stillbirth and Neonatal Death (SANDS) via phone, email or their website.

SANDS Helpline

Tel: 0808 164 3332

Email: helpline@sands.org.uk

Website: <https://www.sands.org.uk/>

The Helpline is for anyone who has been affected by the death of a baby and wants to talk to someone about their experience. The Helpline team are there to listen and give support, and can advise you about finding local help, whether from a Sands group or other counselling services, or information about other relevant support organisations.

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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