



South Eastern Health
and Social Care Trust



Post-natal Exercises

In the early stages it is natural that most of your attention will be focused on your baby but it is important to make time for yourself to aid recovery from the effects of pregnancy and childbirth.

Remember, your body has spent the last nine months changing and adapting significantly. The following advice and exercises are aimed at helping you to regain strength, tone and function in the muscles that have been affected by pregnancy and labour.

A combination of sensible eating together with exercise is a most effective way to lose weight and regain your figure.

After a Caesarean Section

- Your body will take a little longer to recover and heal
- Avoid lifting anything more than the weight of your new baby for the first six weeks where possible
- Check with your car insurance company – most will not cover you to drive for the first 4 – 6 weeks following your Caesarean section.

Deep breathing exercises

Taking a few deep breaths every hour – feeling the ribs expanding at the sides will encourage your circulation, prevent chest infections and start the trunk muscles working.

Try to do this regularly for the first few days.

Supported cough

Do not be afraid to cough if you need to – you can make this easier and less painful by doing the following:

- Bend both knees up and lean your upper body forwards
- Support the wound with your hands or hug a pillow
- Try a few ‘huffs’ – a quick forced breath out through your mouth (like steaming up a mirror).

Foot and ankle exercises

Circle your ankles a few times and paddle your feet up and down briskly. This will help to prevent clots forming and also reduce any swelling in your feet and ankles.

Early activities

- **Positioning for sleep/rest**

You may find it useful to rest or sleep on your side with a pillow or two between your knees particularly if you have had perineal stitches or a Caesarean section.



- **In/out of bed**

- Bend your knees, keeping them together
- Gently draw in and support your lower abdominal muscles, then roll over on your side



- Push up on your elbow and hand and sit up, letting your legs go over the edge of the bed to act as counterbalance to help you sit up.

- **Caring for your back**

It is **vital** that you take care of your back after you have had your baby. This part of your body will be vulnerable for 5 - 6 months after the birth because:

- Your stomach muscles which normally help to support the back are weak
- Your joints are still strengthening up as your pregnancy hormone levels settle
- Caring for your baby will involve lifting, carrying, feeding and changing - all activities that will put extra strain on your back.

Avoid lifting anything heavier than your baby where possible for the first 6 weeks.

Remember whenever you are lifting, tighten your pelvic floor and deep tummy muscles.

Use your legs, bend your knees and get close to whatever you are picking up. This will help to protect your back and pelvic floor.

- **Feeding**

Sit well back on a firm chair - make sure that your shoulders are relaxed - try a firm cushion in the small of your back and rest your feet on a low stool - a pillow on your lap to support your baby may also help.



- **Changing**

When you sit, stand or kneel to change your baby, remember not to stoop.



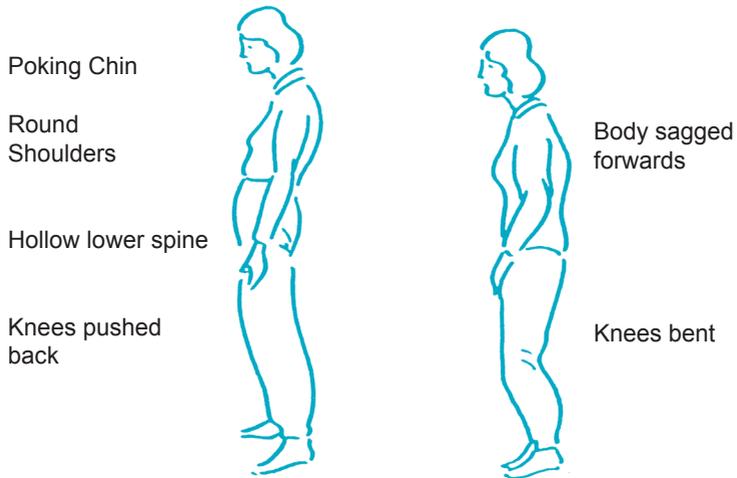
- **Posture**

Your posture will have changed during pregnancy and does not automatically return to normal.

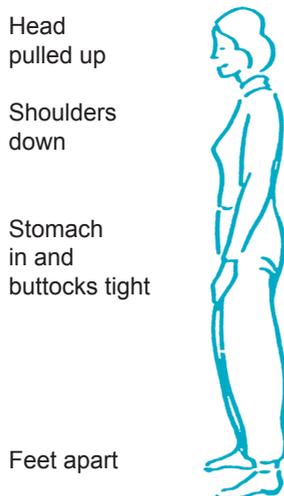
Good posture is important to reduce unnecessary strains and stresses on joints and muscles.

Consciously being aware of good posture is the first step towards improvement.

Two examples of bad posture after birth



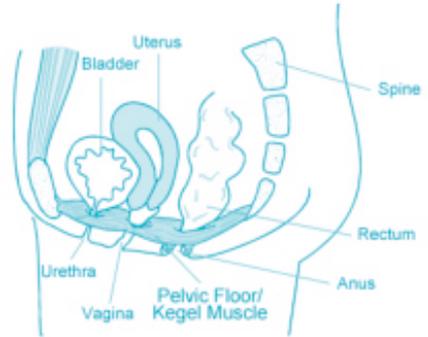
Correct



Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor muscles stretch like a hammock from the pubic bone in front to the tailbone at the back. They are stretched during pregnancy and childbirth.

Strong pelvic floor muscles are essential to prevent leakage of urine when you sneeze or cough, for enjoyable sexual intercourse and to give you complete control of your bowels.



Strong muscles will also help prevent you developing a prolapsed womb (your womb coming down inside your vagina).

These exercises are especially important if you have stitches. Repeating these exercises frequently will improve your circulation and will help you to heal quickly.

If you have needed to have a urinary catheter (a tube inserted into your bladder) wait until this has been removed and you have passed urine normally on a few occasions before commencing pelvic floor muscle exercises.

Otherwise, you should start these exercises the day after having your baby if it feels comfortable.

Pelvic floor contraction

Begin this exercise either lying down or sitting, whichever is more comfortable.

Imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind, and at the same time trying to stop the flow of urine. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift', closing and drawing up the passages between your legs.

1. Long contraction

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles as previously described and hold for as many seconds as you can (up to 10 seconds).

Let the muscles completely release and rest for 4 seconds.

Repeat this long contraction as many times as you can (up to 10 times).

2. Short contraction

Now squeeze and lift more firmly and then release completely straight away. Repeat this as many times as you can (up to 10).

Be careful not to hold your breath, tighten your leg muscles, tummy muscles or buttocks while doing these exercises.

Don't worry if the muscles don't feel very strong or hold for long periods in the beginning. Establish a baseline and build from there.

If passing urine is painful try pouring lukewarm water over the area as you go. This will dilute the urine and reduce the stinging.

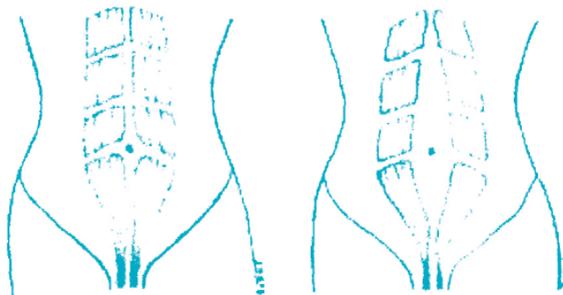
It is quite normal not to open your bowels for 2 - 3 days after delivery. It is important to maintain good fluid intake (at least 1½ litres per day) to avoid constipation. Eat plenty of soft fruit and vegetables for the first week.

If you have stitches, you may feel more comfortable if you pass urine first, then wrap tissue paper around your hand and support your stitches as you open your bowels.

Resting your feet flat on a small box so that your knees are higher than your hips can also help to make opening your bowels easier. As well as leaning your upper body forward.

Looking after your tummy muscles

During pregnancy your tummy muscles will soften and stretch to accommodate your growing baby. This is normal and natural. Some women will notice a gap in their tummy muscles (see diagram below) or be aware of a 'doming' of their tummy during certain activities which put strain on the muscles. This usually heals over within the days and weeks after delivery but if it is very noticeable or uncomfortable after this time seek referral to a physiotherapist for more specific advice and exercises.

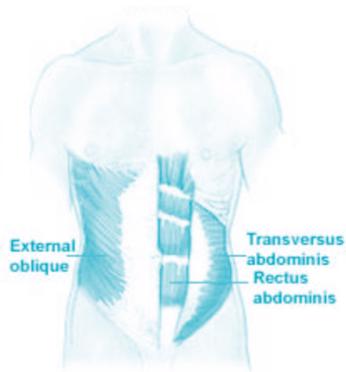


The following gentle tummy exercises will encourage closure of the separation after birth and help strengthen the tummy muscles to support your back and maintain good posture.

You may wish to wait a few days before commencing these exercises if you have had a Caesarean section.

1. Deep stomach exercise - your natural 'internal corset'

This exercise works the deepest muscle in the stomach (Transversus abdominis), which acts like a corset. It stabilises the spine and pelvis, helps flatten your stomach and draws in your waistline.



Lying on your back or on your side:

- Place one hand on your lower abdominal muscles (just above your pubic bone or above your Caesarean section scar), take a relaxed breath in and as you breathe out, gently draw your muscles in, away from your hand
- If comfortable, gently draw up the pelvic floor at the same time
- Hold for 5 seconds or as long as is comfortable at first and gradually progress to 8 - 10 seconds. Repeat 4 - 6 times and gradually increase up to maximum of 10 times if possible
- Breathe normally while doing this exercise.

These exercises can be incorporated in your daily activities while feeding, changing or carrying the baby. They can also be done in sitting, standing and whilst doing activities which require effort eg. lifting, coughing, sneezing.

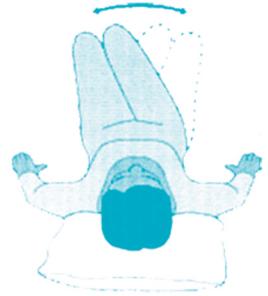
2. Pelvic tilt

Lie with knees bent, feet resting on the bed, pull in gently on your tummy muscles and press the lower part of your back into the bed - you may feel your tailbone peel off the bed slightly. Hold for a count of 5. Relax and repeat x 5.



3. Knee rolling

Lie with knees bent and together, feet resting on the bed. Pull in gently on your tummy muscles and slowly rock your knees from side to side in a small movement.



4. Advanced tummy exercise (Day 14 after Caesarean section)

- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Activate your pelvic floor muscles and deep stomach muscles gently and keep them engaged
- Breathe out as you gently raise your head and shoulders off the bed a little
- Breathe in as you return to start position
- Repeat x 5.



If you notice 'doming' of your tummy muscles during this exercises you should stop and continue with the earlier exercises to allow your muscles more time to heal back over.

Review this exercise again in a week or two and reassess.

General exercise advice

- Listen to your body, start slowly and build
- If any exercise feels uncomfortable, stop
- Walking is an ideal exercise to begin to build fitness levels
- Wait 6 weeks before swimming to allow blood loss to settle and any wounds to fully heal
- Wait 12 weeks before taking part in high impact or high intensity aerobic exercise to allow your pelvic floor muscles to recover and joints to begin to regain their strength
- A well fitting sports bra is essential for any moderate to high impact activities - it is always a good idea to get re-measured as your size will likely have changed after pregnancy
- Inform your instructor that you have recently had a baby when returning to group exercise classes
- Ligaments still show some laxity for up to 5 months after birth so it may be wise to delay return to contact sports for the first few months.