

Postnatal Exercise Program Guidelines



Introduction

Your abdominal (tummy) muscles and pelvic floor muscles have been stretched and weakened during pregnancy so it's important to exercise in the early postnatal period to help strengthen these muscles.

This booklet outlines the exercises which will help strengthen abdominal and pelvic muscles and also provides advice on back care and how to return to general exercise.

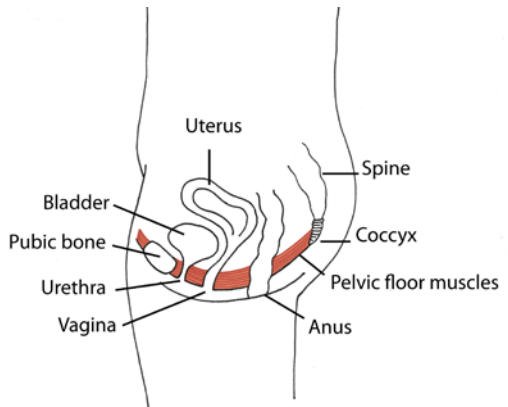
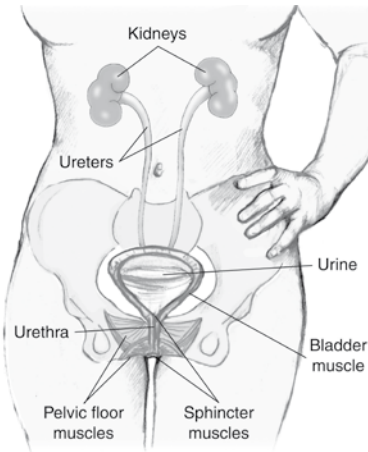
It is relatively common for women to experience some back or pelvic pain during pregnancy. Often this is related to the softening of ligaments (part of the natural hormonal changes during pregnancy) and the stretching of abdominal muscles. It can take a number of weeks for these aches and pains to resolve after birth.



Pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles and ligaments that support the bladder, uterus (womb) and bowel. They attach at your pubic bone at the front and to your tailbone at the back.

When the pelvic floor is strong, it supports pelvic organs and prevents problems such as incontinence and prolapse. They allow you to 'hold on' until an appropriate time and place but if these muscles are weak, you may lose control of your bladder or bowel.



Essential exercises after birth to restore pelvic floor

- **Rest** by lying down
- **Ice** by using an icepack
- **Compression** by wearing an extra pair of undies
- **Elevation** of pelvic floor by lying down, ideally on your tummy with pillows positioned under hips.

The following exercises are suitable for women after natural vaginal delivery and caesarean delivery.

Pelvic exercises can help to reduce swelling and pain, as well as treat or prevent incontinence. For best results, do them at least three times a day.

It may take up to three months for the muscles to regain their strength.

Begin Pelvic Floor Strengthening Exercises

Pelvic floor muscles can be worked in three ways, and you can begin these exercises immediately after birth when sensation has returned.

Exercise 1: Long holds to improve strength

- Start in a lying position.
- Squeeze the muscles around your vagina and back passage and lift, as if to stop yourself from passing wind or 'hold on' from passing urine, while keeping your abdominal, buttock and thigh muscles relaxed.
- Count how long you can hold them up. This is your 'hold time', but try not to hold your breath. Breathe! Rest for 5 seconds.
- Repeat the pelvic floor exercise, holding again for your hold time. Rest. Continue until you feel fatigued.
- Try to gradually increase your hold time and the number of repetitions.
- Aim to eventually be able to do **10 x 10 second good quality holds**.
- **2-3 times daily** for the first 12 months then reduce to 1-2 times a day every day of your life!
- As pelvic muscles get stronger, make the exercise more challenging by performing them while sitting, standing and during activities such as lifting and walking.

Exercise 2: Quick squeezes for strength and endurance

- Squeeze and lift pelvic floor muscles and release immediately.
Repeat 15 times once a day.

Exercise 3: “The Knack”

The Knack is a strong and well-timed contraction of the pelvic floor muscles. It involves the pelvic floor muscles contracting immediately before and during any increase in downward pressure on the pelvic floor.

When the pelvic floor muscles are working as they should, they contract automatically before and during any increase in pressure from within the abdomen such as a cough, sneeze or lift.

Women often lose the ability to automatically contract their pelvic floor muscles with pregnancy and childbirth. Actively contracting your pelvic floor muscles will often overcome the bladder leakage that occurs with loss of activity.

Squeeze and lift your pelvic floor immediately before you cough, sneeze or laugh. Also, when doing activities that increase downward pressure on the pelvic floor such as lifting, blowing your nose and standing from a sitting position.

How to practise “The Knack”

1. Sit away from the back of a chair or stand tall with you chest lifted and the normal inward curve in your lower back.
2. Lift and squeeze the muscles in and around all three pelvic openings (urethra, vagina and anus), immediately before you cough, sneeze or lift.
3. Contract around all three pelvic openings at once, with a strong inward lift and squeeze of pelvic floor muscles.
4. Maintain pelvic floor contraction, while doing a small cough.
5. After the cough, relax pelvic floor muscles back to normal resting level.
6. Progress this exercise with a more forceful cough or repeating a couple of coughs in a row, maintaining pelvic floor contraction throughout.

Take care of your pelvic floor

Good Bowel Habits

- Avoid **constipation**
- Drink plenty of water
- Eat a high fibre diet
- Exercise regularly
- Go to the toilet when you feel the urge
- Raise your knees above your hips by using a stool
- Lean forward resting your elbows on your knees and relax your tummy muscles
- Don't strain or push.



Good Bladder Habits

- Usual to empty bladder 5-6 times during day and 1-2 times overnight
- Use a 'bladder diary' to keep track of frequency
- Only go when you need to, not "just in case"
- Lean forward with a straight back and allow your tummy muscles and pelvic floor to relax
- Avoid drinking too much caffeine and alcohol.

Back care

- When lifting an object, always bend hips and knees, while keeping your back straight, with gentle pelvic floor and abdominal contraction. Hold the object close to your body
- Avoid sudden jerky or twisting movements
- Work surface should be at waist height e.g. changing nappies, bathing baby
- Make sure you are not leaning forward or slouching while feeding baby
- Sit back in the chair, feet well supported and use pillows to support and lift baby closer.

Avoid heavy lifting

- It is recommended that you do not lift anything heavier than your baby for the first 6 weeks. Heavy loads will put downward pressure and strain on your pelvic floor
- Remember to 'lift with care', contracting your pelvic floor as you lift.

Return to exercise

- Low impact exercises have been shown to reduce the incidence of postnatal depression
- Walking is an ideal low impact exercise in the early post natal period. Begin gently and gradually build up within limits of comfort and fatigue
- Other low impact exercises such as cycling, swimming, yoga and pilates are also recommended
- Wait 2-4 weeks after a vaginal delivery and 6-8 weeks post caesarean delivery before starting any structured exercise classes, depending on your recovery
- Avoid high impact exercises like jogging and jumping for at least three months after birth. High impact exercises can put unnecessary strain on muscles, joints and the pelvic floor.

Remember, each woman's recovery is different after birth.

Try to set realistic goals and incorporate plenty of rest in between gentle exercise.

Tone up your tummy with abdominal strengthening

Abdominal muscles consist of several layers of muscle which run from your ribs to your pelvis. During pregnancy, abdominal muscles stretch and separate down the middle to allow room for baby. The width of separation varies.



This separation may result in back pain which can be relieved by wearing abdominal supports, e.g. compression garments made of an elastic material that pull up and over the tummy to provide lift and support during the pregnancy and postnatal phase.

Avoid push ups, planks, sit ups or any abdominal crunches and any exercise that requires heavy abdominal muscle use.

Roll onto your side to get up from lying.

If you have a separation greater than three fingers as assessed by your nurse, midwife or physiotherapist, please see a women's health physiotherapist on discharge as it is important to have ongoing management for the separation within 6-8 weeks after birth.

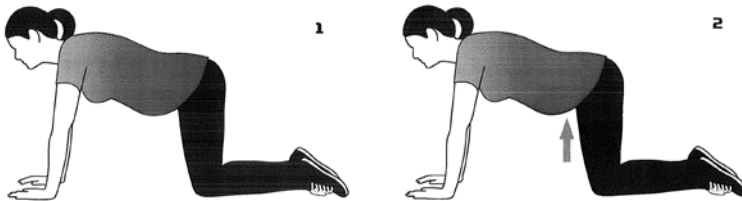
Exercises to strengthen abdominal muscles

These exercises are designed to strengthen abdominal muscles and pull the abdominal muscle separation back together.

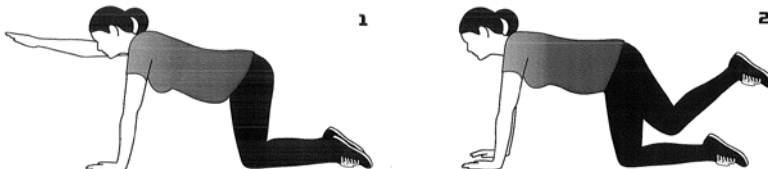
Commence DAY 4 onwards

- Start this exercise lying on your bed
- Place your hand on your lower tummy
- Take an easy breath in, breathe out. Before you breathe in again, draw your lower tummy in away from your hand – continue breathing and try to hold your tummy in for 5 seconds
- **Aim** to increase your length of hold to 10 x 10 second holds 1-2 daily
- **Always** draw your lower tummy in, and hold it in, as you lift.

Once you leave hospital, progress to four-point-kneeling



To make it harder, incorporate opposite arm and leg



Getting Up and Moving Early

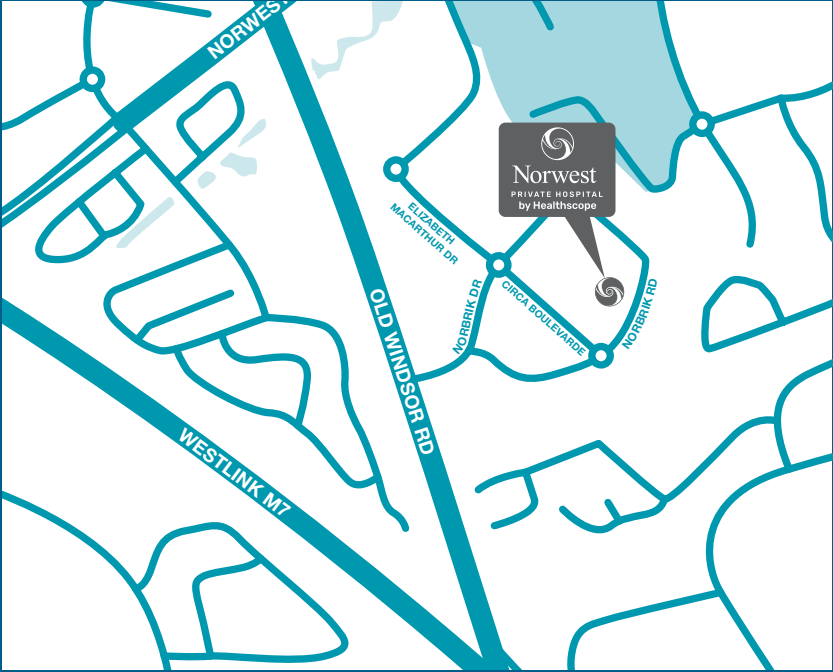
It is important to get out of bed and start moving as soon as possible after giving birth, however it can be quite uncomfortable.

Here is a way to get out of bed without putting too much strain on your back and tummy. Get out of bed by rolling onto your side so that you don't strain your wound. This way to get out of bed is recommended after both vaginal delivery and caesarean delivery.



Further information

If you have any questions about the exercise program while you are in hospital, please ask your nurse for the hospital physiotherapist to see you. If problems arise or persist once you go home, **please consult a women's health physiotherapist for further advice.**



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