

Physiotherapy

BEFORE & AFTER
CHILDBIRTH



WOMEN'S HEALTH INFORMATION SERIES

PHYSIOTHERAPY

BEFORE & AFTER CHILDBIRTH

When you are pregnant and after you have given birth, your back needs extra care. Changing hormone levels cause supporting ligaments to soften and become more stretchy during pregnancy and for up to six months after birth. Your tummy and pelvic floor muscles stretch with the growth and birth of your baby. With the joints not well supported, it is easy to injure your back or pelvis.

This booklet has been designed to guide you through the correct techniques to help you protect your body. It also provides advice on exercises to keep you fit during your pregnancy and assist with your recovery after the birth of your baby. If you have any questions or require further advice, please see your Women's Health Physiotherapist.

DURING PREGNANCY

Bending

- Try to have work surfaces at waist height.
- Don't stoop over low surfaces.
- Kneel or squat instead of bending for low-level jobs such as gardening or bed making.

Lifting & Carrying

- When lifting keep your back straight and bend your knees and hips. Hold the load close to your body.
- When shifting a load, move your feet instead of twisting at the waist.
- Keep loads small.
- If you are holding your breath when lifting, the object is too heavy for you to lift and carry.
- Use shopping trolleys, laundry trolleys and prams to assist you in carrying.
- If you have young children, minimise lifting and encourage children to help themselves. For example, into and out of the car, or on and off your lap.



Standing

- Stand and walk tall. Feel how your tummy pulls in and your bottom tucks under.



Sitting

- Choose a comfortable chair that supports head, back and legs. When sitting, try using a small cushion or rolled towel in the small of your back.
- Raise your feet so your knees are slightly higher than your hips.



Lying Down

- Try lying on your side with a pillow under your tummy, top arm and leg.



Getting Out of Bed

To reduce strain on your back, pelvis and tummy, bend your knees and roll to one side. Then push up with your hands into sitting as you lower your legs over the edge of the bed. Remember not to 'jackknife' forward into sitting.



Exercise Safely

Regular exercise is very important to maintain general fitness. Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

- Walking briskly is an easy way to exercise. Start with ten minutes and work towards 45 minutes a day.
- Swimming is also excellent exercise particularly if back or pelvic pain is limiting walking. Pool water temperature should be below 30 degrees celsius. Alternate your strokes with water walking and kickboard activities.
- A low-impact exercise group tailored to pregnancy and conducted by a physiotherapist allows you to enjoy safe exercise to music.
- Avoid activities that cause overheating eg. vigorous exercise, spa or sauna.

**Exercise in moderation.
Stop before you get tired.
Be careful not to dehydrate.**

**Have water available to drink before,
during and after exercising.**

**If you have pain, bleeding or excessive shortness of
breath, see your doctor.**

DAILY EXERCISES

It is important to maintain tummy and pelvic floor muscle control during pregnancy. Try the following exercises.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

The pelvic floor muscles have four main functions:

- support of the pelvic organs,
(the bladder, uterus and bowel)
- control of the bladder and bowel
- improve vaginal tone to help with sexual enjoyment
- support the back by working with the tummy muscles.

To keep these muscles working well, make pelvic floor exercises part of your routine for the rest of your life. You can start during pregnancy and continue after birth. Make sure you obtain your copy of the Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises pamphlet, or practise the postnatal pelvic floor exercises from this pamphlet.

1. Sit and lean slightly forward with a straight back.
2. Squeeze and lift the muscles as if you are trying to stop a wee.
3. Hold the squeeze for up to five seconds, relax for up to ten seconds.
4. Repeat up to ten times, three to four times a day.
5. Keep breathing while exercising.

Abdominal Bracing

Tummy muscles are your in-built corset, which works with your pelvic floor muscles, to support your back and abdominal contents, as well as supporting your baby. This exercise strengthens the deepest layer of that corset.

1. Stand with knees slightly bent.
2. Gently and slowly, pull your belly button in towards your spine. Keep your back and pelvis still and keep breathing. Hold for five to ten seconds and repeat five to ten times. This exercise can also be practised in sitting and side lying.
3. Use this action when lifting and carrying.

Sit-ups are not recommended due to stress placed on your neck, back, tummy and pelvic floor muscles

Easing Backache

- Sit with a small pillow or folded towel in the hollow of your back.
- Try pelvic rocking on hands and knees or in standing.



Pelvic Rocking

1. on your hands and knees
2. have knees apart
3. place hands in line with shoulders
4. arch your back - bring chin to chest
5. pull tummy in as you tuck your bottom under.

To Relieve Leg Cramps

- Try a calf muscle stretch, see diagram.
- Hold this stretch for ten seconds.
- Repeat with the other leg, doing two or three stretches each side.



AFTER CHILDBIRTH

After childbirth your ligaments and muscles will be weak and lax. It is important to follow all the backcare advice and continue the exercises so you can care for yourself and your baby.

Bending

- Instead of stooping over low surfaces, try to raise the surface or lower yourself.
- Bath and change your baby on waist high surfaces.
- Try to keep your back straight, as you push prams, trolleys and vacuum cleaners.



Carrying

- When carrying your baby on your hip, change sides frequently. If using a baby sling, carry your baby high on your chest to avoid strain on back and shoulders.
- Try not to carry the baby long distances, use a pram.
- When shopping or washing, carry smaller loads or better still use a trolley.
- If using a capsule, leave it in the car. The weight of the capsule and your baby strains your back and wrists.



Feeding

Sit well back in the chair, with your back well supported and feet resting on a stool. Support the weight of your baby and your arm on a pillow(s) to help relax your shoulders.

- Check that your shoulders are low and comfortable.
- Try feeding your baby whilst lying on your side in bed. It's a good alternative to sitting.



DAILY EXERCISES

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

For postnatal and pregnant women, the following exercises are specific to exercising the pelvic floor muscles. Postnatal women should begin gentle pelvic floor muscle exercises soon after birth.

Try the following.

1. Lie on your bed, knees bent up and slightly apart.
2. Tighten the muscles gently around your back and front passages as if you are trying to stop passing wind or urine. Initially it may be difficult to feel the muscles work, but if you practise a few squeezes at a time, several times a day, it gets easier.
3. Don't try to hold the squeeze just yet.
4. Gentle exercises done this way can help to reduce the bruising and swelling.

Once any initial discomfort has eased:

- test how long you can hold
- test how many you can do
- practise your exercises in different positions
- as your muscle control improves, try holding the contraction for longer, or doing more contractions in a row
- your goal should be to complete up to four lots of ten contractions each day, gradually holding the contractions for longer
- try to link your exercises with daily activities, such as feeding your baby, or washing the dishes
- for good support, tighten your pelvic floor muscles whenever you cough, sneeze or lift.

If you have had a Caesarean birth, it is still important to practise your pelvic floor muscle exercises regularly.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Stress Test

At twelve weeks, test how your pelvic floor muscles can cope with extra stress.

1. Stand with feet apart and bladder full.
2. Gently jump up and down whilst coughing five times.

If you:

- leak wind or urine
- feel like everything is falling out
- your back aches.

Seek advice from your doctor or Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Abdominal Muscles

During your pregnancy, these muscles have been stretched and weakened, and need specific exercises to strengthen them again. As they act as your in-built corset, with your pelvic floor muscles, they will give constant support to your back, abdominal and pelvic contents. This is particularly important when you move, exercise, lift and carry, cough and sneeze.

Tummy Indrawing

An exercise to strengthen the deepest layer of tummy muscles. You can try this exercise lying on your side or on your hands and knees.

1. Gently and slowly, pull your belly button in towards your spine. Keep your back and pelvis still and keep breathing.
2. Hold for five to ten seconds, relax, and repeat five to ten times. This exercise can also be practised while sitting or standing.
3. Use this action to brace your tummy and spine, before you lift and carry anything.

Remember: Always draw your tummy in when you cough, sneeze, bend, lift or carry.

Pelvic Tilting

1. Lie on your back, knees bent and feet on floor. Place your hands on your hipbones.
2. Tilt your pubic bone towards your face, flattening the curve of your lower back into the floor or bed. If you find this difficult, it may be easier if you place your hand in the small of your back and then flatten your back onto your hand.
3. Try not to push through your feet, or lift your bottom off the bed or floor.
4. Hold for three to four seconds, then relax. Repeat five to ten times.



Resisted Crossovers

1. Sit forward on the edge of a chair so your hands easily reach your knees. Your feet may rest on a stool or cushions.
2. Place your left hand on the inside of your right knee.
3. Push your knee against your hand so no movement occurs. Keep breathing. Hold this position for five seconds. Release slowly.
4. Repeat the same action with your right hand and left knee.
5. Repeat this five to ten times on each side. You may also do this while standing, with your foot resting on a chair, and your knee at a right angle.

Extra Tummy Strengtheners

Begin this only after you have mastered the ones above.

1. Lie on your back, knees bent and feet on floor.
2. Place your hands beneath the small of your back.
3. Brace the corset muscles of the tummy, as you lift one foot just off the floor.
4. Slowly stretch that leg out, straightening your knee, but not lowering the leg completely to the floor.
5. Continue to breathe normally, hold the position for up to five seconds.
6. Return to the start position and repeat using the other leg.
7. Repeat five to ten times on each side.

After Caesarean Birth

It is important that you allow time for your body to recover, and for healing to take place, which may continue for several weeks.

It is important to avoid strenuous activity for six to twelve weeks after a caesarean section.

Listen to your body. If you feel tired, or your stitches ache, you need to rest. Generally increase your activity as your body allows.

- A daily walk is the best way to start. Initially walk short distances, then gradually increase the distance to include long walks and hills.
- Start the tummy exercises as soon as you feel comfortable, usually around day three. Go slowly, but stop if you experience any pain.
- Start with light housework, such as cooking or washing dishes, and gradually progress to heavier chores, like vacuuming.
- Generally you will be safe to drive when you are able to push the pedals without pain, move your feet quickly from accelerator to brake, and look over your shoulder.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Good Posture

- When standing, check your posture to ensure you stand tall. To do this, lift the top of your head up towards the ceiling, tuck your tummy in and drop your shoulders down.
- When sitting for long periods, including breastfeeding, place a pillow or rolled towel in the small of your back. Make sure your feet are supported, either on a stool or pillow.
- When rising from lying, bend knees, roll to one side and push up with hands as you lower your legs over the side of the bed and straighten up slowly. It is not recommended to 'jackknife' forward.



Good posture reduces the strain on your back

SIT TALL

STAND TALL

WALK TALL

Rest

- Refresh yourself by lying on your bed whenever you can. When feeding your baby.
- Practice relaxation.
- Deal with chores and problems one at a time.

Easing Backache After Childbirth

- Gentle, rhythmic pelvic tilting may help reduce lower backache (see under abdominal muscles).
- Another exercise is to try rolling your knees from side to side while lying on your back with knees bent and feet flat on floor.

Good Bladder Habits

- Drink 8 cups of fluid per day.
- Reduce caffeine and alcohol intake.
- Exercise your pelvic floor muscles daily.
- Go to the toilet to pass urine only if you need to. Going to the toilet four to six times per day and once at night is normal.
- Take your time and empty your bladder completely.

Constipation & Haemorrhoids

- Adequate fluid, fibre and exercise are vital for regular soft bowel motions. If breastfeeding, remember to drink an extra litre of fluid each day.
- Straining when using your bowel stretches and weakens your pelvic floor muscles and causes haemorrhoids.
- For the first few weeks after birth, it may be more comfortable to empty your bowel if you support your stitches by wrapping toilet paper around your hand and gently applying pressure upwards against your stitches.
- When on the toilet, lean forward and rest your forearms on your knees. Keep your back straight and have your knees slightly higher than your hips.

Blocked Milk Ducts

Blocked milk ducts, or mastitis, may cause inflammation, tenderness or lumps in your breasts. Prompt treatment is essential. Physiotherapy may be helpful, however if you have a fever or flu-like symptoms, consult your doctor first.

Sexual Intercourse

Intercourse may be more comfortable if you use water based lubricating gel (not petroleum jelly). For further information, please consult the Sexuality After Your Baby pamphlet from this series. If pain continues, see your doctor or Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Returning to Exercise & Sport

General exercise along with walking is recommended, and can start immediately. You can start swimming after your six-week check.

When returning to more specific sports, increase your activity gradually. A postnatal exercise class run by a physiotherapist, starting six weeks after the birth of your baby is recommended. These classes prepare you for more strenuous activities and provide professional advice for any physical problems.

Many women are keen to return to their pre-pregnancy sport. Below are a few guidelines that may help you decide the right time for more vigorous activities.

Strenuous activities which involve running, jumping and fast movements, should not be undertaken during the first six weeks after birth, as your body needs time to recover. These activities place too much stress on the pelvic floor muscles and tummy muscles that have been stretched and weakened by pregnancy and birth. Ligaments and other soft tissues are also vulnerable to injury during this time. Breast tissue is also stretched during the first few weeks, and for many women, enlarged breasts make vigorous activity uncomfortable. Ensure that you are wearing a well-fitted sports bra or nursing bra during exercise.

Before starting any high impact activities, it is advisable that you are able to complete all of the following:

- repeat ten strong pelvic floor muscle contractions consecutively without tiring
- pass the pelvic floor muscle stress test before starting any vigorous activities
- perform the tummy exercises comfortably.

Ultimately, the decision to return to sport depends on how you feel. Be prepared to cut back and seek advice or treatment for any persistent problems.

Further information and assistance

Your Women's Health Physiotherapist

King Edward Memorial Hospital Physiotherapy (Subiaco)

Telephone: (08) 9340 2790

Australian Physiotherapy Association (Nedlands)

(08) 9389 9211

HealthDirect

Freecall: 1800 022 222

The Contenance Foundation of Australia

Telephone: (08) 9381 4925

Country Callers Freecall: 1800 330 066

Other brochures within the
Women's Health Information Series include:

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises
Menopause
Osteoporosis
Postnatal Anxiety, Stress and Depression
Premenstrual Syndrome
Sexuality After Your Baby

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