

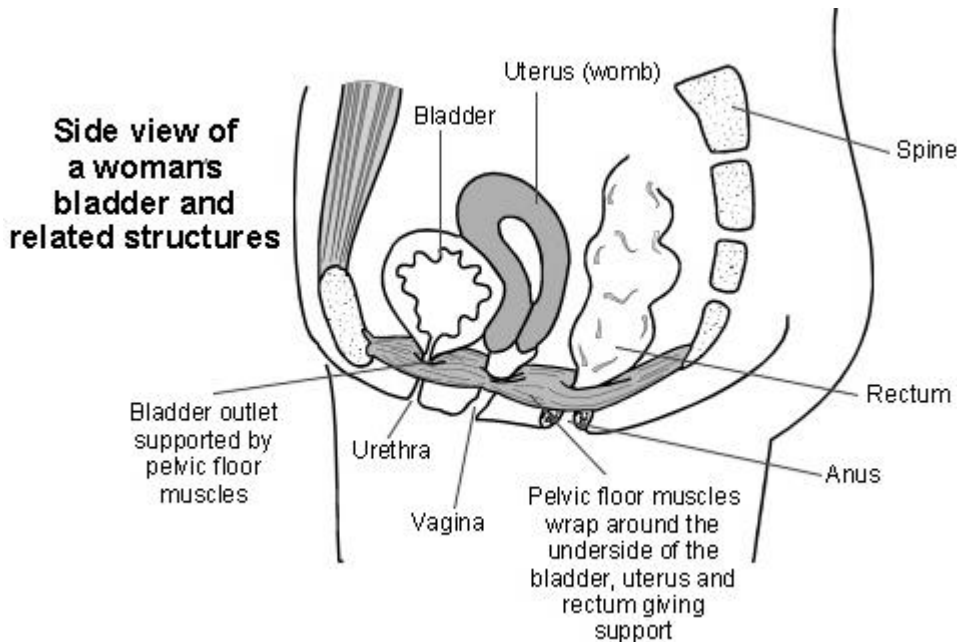
# Pelvic Health Advice and Exercise Post-Partum

We have put together a few tips and exercises to help you recover after having your baby.

## 1 – Pelvic Floor Muscles Exercises

It is important for everyone to do some pelvic floor strengthening after they have had a baby.

The pelvic floor muscles are a 'hammock' of muscles underneath your pelvis. They attached at the front of the pelvis to the pubic bone and span backwards to attach at the base of the spine around the sacrum and coccyx (tailbone). The opening of the bladder, birth canal (vagina) and the bowel all pass through the pelvic floor.



### What does the pelvic floor do?

1. The pelvic floor muscles are continually working to help support your pelvic organs and abdominal content (bladder, uterus in women and bowel) from underneath and stop them dropping down.
2. The pelvic floor muscles help with bladder and bowel control. The pelvic floor muscles circle around the opening for the urethra, vagina and back passage and stop you leaking urine, wind or faeces. The muscles need to work harder when you cough or sneeze or on exertion to avoid leaking.
3. The pelvic floor muscles have an important sexual function, helping to increased sexual awareness for you and your partner during sexual intercourse.

Common disorders of the pelvic floor include urinary incontinence (leaking) or prolapse of the vaginal walls or the uterus. Like other muscles in the body, 'if you don't use them, you lose them'. They weaken and are no longer efficient at doing their job. The pelvic floor muscles are affected and can weaken for a variety of reasons:

- Childbirth
- Pelvic surgery
- Natural aging process
- Hormonal changes for example the menopause
- Obesity
- Chronic constipation
- Repetitive heavy lifting
- Smoking
- Medical conditions such as diabetes, multiple sclerosis and stroke
- Repetitive urine infections
- Chronic cough, chest infection and conditions such as asthma and COPD
- Hypermobility (being very flexible)

## Pelvic Floor Exercises

A pelvic floor muscle contraction is performed by closing and drawing up your front and back passage. Imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift'. In the beginning it may be easier to do the exercises in lying, but you can progress them to sitting and standing.

There are two types of exercises you should do;

### 1. Quick and strong

Squeeze as hard as you can and then relax. Rest a second and then repeat up to 10 times.

### 2. Endurance

Squeeze and hold for up to 10 seconds. You must feel the muscle relax after each contraction. Aim to repeat it as many times as you can, building up to a maximum of 10 times.

**DO NOT** Pull in your stomach excessively

**DO NOT** Squeeze your legs together

**DO NOT** Tighten your buttocks

**DO NOT** Hold your breath.



You must aim to do these exercises at **least 3 times a day**. Generally, it takes 3-6 months to get a muscle really strong again. Do not do so many that the muscle begins to ache, remember it is quality not quantity!

## 2 – Urinary Incontinence

Urinary incontinence can occur after having a baby or for other reasons throughout life. Doing pelvic floor muscle exercises may help to prevent this.

### Types of Urinary Incontinence:

#### ❖ Stress Urinary Incontinence

You may find you leak urine when you cough, sneeze, laugh, run or jump. This is called stress incontinence. When you do any of these activities there is an increase in pressure in the abdomen which pushes down against the bladder and pelvic floor. The pelvic floor muscles can help by contracting to squeeze the urethra shut.

#### ❖ Urge Urinary Incontinence

Urgency is the sudden desire to go to the toilet immediately and if you leak as you rush to the toilet you may have urge incontinence. Sometimes the leakage occurs with little or no warning. There are several reasons why this may happen. It may be because you have fallen into bad bladder habits. It may also be due to an irritation inside your bladder, from caffeine or alcohol or a urine infection, or because you have lost control of your bladder muscles, after childbirth.

#### ❖ Mixed Urinary Incontinence

This is a combination of both stress and urge urinary incontinence.

## 3 – Bowel incontinence

The muscles that control your bowel can also be affected after child birth. During child birth the sphincter muscles in the anal passage can be stretched or damaged. This can mean it is difficult to control wind or bowel movements.

## 4 – Prolapses

The pelvic organs in a woman's pelvis (uterus, bladder and rectum) are normally held in place by ligaments, muscles and connective tissue. If the supporting structures are weakened or become overstretched, the pelvic organs can bulge (prolapse) from their natural position into the vagina. This is known as a pelvic organ prolapse (POP). Pelvic organ prolapses are common in women. For the majority of women, prolapses are mild and do not cause any problems. However, it may cause a heavy, dragging sensation and you may be aware of a bulge in the vagina. This can also affect your bladder, bowel and sexual function.

## 5 – Back or Pelvic Pain

If you are having back or pelvic pain you can get help and advice from physiotherapy. Here are a few tips and exercises to help get you started.

### Top Tips to ease pain

- Avoid standing for long periods.
- Carry shopping equally in each hand and carry babies in front of you, not on your hip. Remember the more you carry the greater strain on your pelvic joints.
- Wear low heels and shock absorbing footwear to reduce stress through the pelvis.
- Go upstairs one step at a time and plan your day so you can reduce the amount of times you have to use them.
- Cuddle children sitting on your lap rather than lifting them.
- Avoid things you know will hurt such as squatting, vacuuming or other household chores. Listen to your body.
- Accept help from your partner/family/friends, to reduce stressful postures or strenuous shopping trips etc.
- Sit down for tasks you would normally stand for e.g. preparing food, ironing, dressing etc.
- Only do essential lifting, to avoid strain on joints.
- Maintain a good posture when feeding your baby. Have your lower back well supported

### Exercises for back or pelvic pain

The use of exercise is important to improve muscle function and ease discomfort. If you are able to exercise in your pregnancy, here are a few suggestions. If these exercises increase your pain, please stop doing them.

- **Deep Stomach Muscles (Transversus Abdominis)**

In sitting/standing/lying place your hands around the lower part of your bump below the belly button. Breathe in gently. As you breathe out, pull in the lower part of the stomach, drawing your 'bump' in towards your spine, away from your hands. Do not move your back. Holding in your tummy, continue to breathe normally.

Aim for hold for 3-5 breath cycles. Repeat 5-10 times.



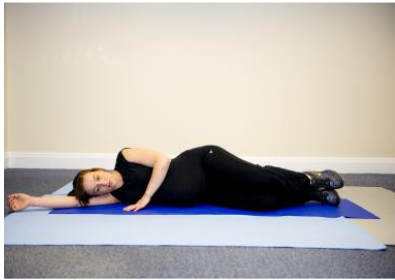
- **Pelvic Tilting**

In tall sitting, standing or on all fours, arching your lower back and stick your chest out. Then, pull your lower tummy towards your spine and tuck under with your tailbone. Relax your shoulders, do not hold your breath. Repeat 5-10 times.



- **“Clam” – Glut Med in Side Lying**

Lie on your side with the hip that needs exercising upper most, knees bent halfway up. Keeping your feet together, lift your top knee away from your bottom knee, hold for 5 seconds before gently lowering and repeating. Take care not to roll back through the pelvis when you lift the top knee, imagine you have a cup of tea resting on the uppermost part of the pelvis and you do not want to knock it off. Be careful not to widen your legs into pain and you may find using a pillow between your legs helpful. Repeat 5-10 times.



**Remember:**

- Engage the deep stomach muscles and pelvic floor muscles, by bracing them before and during the activities that give you discomfort. This action can help support the pelvis and prevent pain.
- Exercise within your pain limits. Be guided by your pain as to what you can do.
- Avoid activities where your legs move apart more than is comfortable. Some gym equipment and breaststroke may involve this.
- Build up exercise slowly as some pain takes a while to come on.



- Postnatal exercise classes run by qualified instructors, are a good way to exercise. Always tell instructors about your pelvic or back pain.
- Remember good posture when you are breastfeeding, lifting and changing the baby and pushing prams.

## 6 – Separated stomach muscles (diastasis recti)

In pregnancy, the tummy (abdominal) muscles stretch to allow room for the baby to grow. Sometimes this causes the muscles to separate along their midline (linea alba). The muscles affected are the 'six-pack' muscles (rectus abdominis muscles). You may notice a gap, particularly when sitting up from a lying down position. When this happens, you may see a visible peak, '**doming**' and this is what you may hear referred to as a tummy gap or diastasis rectus abdominis (DRA).

After pregnancy DRA is common, it does not usually cause a problem and in most cases, the muscles come back together within a few weeks. If this does not happen, physiotherapy can help.

## 7 – Exercising Post-Partum

You can start gentle exercises when you feel up to it. Anything high impact may be better to wait until your 6 week check up with the GP. You may wish to wait longer if you notice any signs of incontinence or prolapse, as it takes time for your body and muscles to strengthen up again.

Remember it will take many months for your body to recover fully. These are just some tips and exercises to help you on your way, but if you have any concerns we are here to help.

