

# Postnatal exercises

## Physiotherapy advice for women after pregnancy

This leaflet provides information, advice, and safe exercises for after your pregnancy, to help your body recover safely and effectively.

It is important to take a little time for yourself. Although you cannot expect to return to full pre-pregnancy fitness immediately, there is a lot you can do now to help strengthen your body, regain your fitness, and increase your energy.

During pregnancy your body will have gone through a lot of changes. Hormones and any weight you may have gained will have affected your ligaments, muscles, joints, and posture. It is important to return to your previous activity level in the right way.

### It is important to:

- Listen to your body
- Stop if it hurts
- Stop when tired
- Never exercise if feeling unwell
- Continue exercises at home.

### Slow down or stop exercising if you experience any of the following symptoms

- Increased fatigue (tiredness)
- Heavy vagina (your vagina feels like it is pulling down/feels heavy)
- Feeling of 'pushing down' (pressure or heavy feeling in your groin/vagina)
- Muscle aches and pains
- Colour changes in lochia (discharge after pregnancy); it becomes pink or red
- Heavier than normal lochia flow
- Lochia starts flowing again after it has stopped
- Swollen abdomen (tummy).

**If you are unsure about any of the symptoms, please ask your midwife or GP for advice.**



## Activities to do in the first few days

### Breathing exercises

Whilst you are less active than normal it is important to keep your lungs well ventilated. This helps to prevent chest infections.

- Take a deep slow breath in through your nose.
- Hold for a count of two and sigh the air out through your mouth.
- Repeat three times.
- Do this regularly through the day until you are up and about as usual.

### Circulation exercises

- Briskly circle then bend and stretch your ankles for 20 to 30 seconds (see image). This helps your circulation and prevents and reduces swelling in your legs and ankles.
- Start this exercise immediately to reduce a build-up of fluid in your legs and ankles. Continue until you are up and about.
- Repeat approximately five times throughout the day.



**Circulation exercises**

### Posture (sitting, standing, and lying down correctly)

Posture is how you hold your body when sitting, standing, or lying down. It is important to be aware of your posture throughout the day to minimise your risk of developing back pain or muscle strains. Below are some helpful tips to try.

- When sitting, place a small pillow behind your lower back to support you.
- When standing for daily tasks try to avoid leaning forwards. Sit or kneel if you are able to, so that tables are at waist height. If this is not possible then take regular breaks.
- When sat reading or using a tablet or phone, have a pillow under your arms to reduce the strain on your shoulders and back.
- When lifting, keep the weight close to your body to ease the strain on your back.
- Try to use your tummy muscles and pelvic floor when lifting or carrying, this will help to protect your back from injury.
- If you need to, support your abdomen (tummy) with one hand when sitting down or standing up from a chair or bed.
- When getting up from bed, roll onto your side, swing your legs over the edge and push yourself up slowly. Try to avoid sitting up straight from lying.

## What are pelvic floor muscles?

Your pelvic floor muscles are a group of muscles that contribute to the stability of your pelvis, and the ones you use when you need to control your bladder or bowels. They also play an important role in your sex life.

## Why are pelvic floor exercises important?

During pregnancy, hormonal changes and the extra weight you carry can cause your pelvic floor muscles to weaken. It is important to strengthen them, just like we would with any other muscle.

## How do I do pelvic floor exercises?

Start these exercises as soon as possible after pregnancy. If you have a catheter wait until it is removed before exercising.

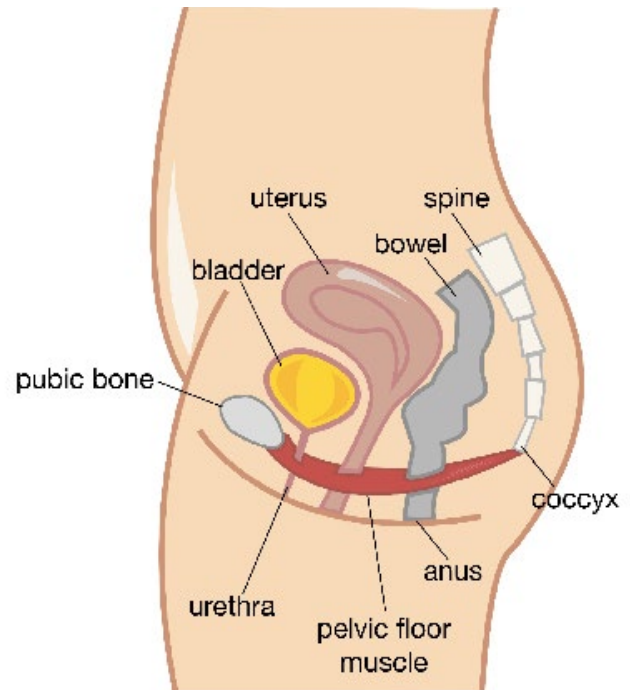
- Your pelvic floor attaches from your coccyx (at the bottom of your spine) to your pubic bone (at the front of your pelvis), like a sling. To use your pelvic floor, try to pull these two points together.
- You can imagine that you are trying to stop your urine flow mid-stream and avoiding passing wind. **Tighten the muscles around your back passage and also tighten and pull up those around your vagina - 'Squeeze and Lift'.**
- While doing the exercises try not to hold your breath, squeeze your legs together, or tighten your tummy and buttocks.
- Do not practice your pelvic floor exercises when emptying your bladder, as this can lead to a urine infection.

If you are struggling with your pelvic floor exercises after four weeks, then ask your GP for a referral to a women's health physiotherapist.

Your pelvic floor muscles can be exercised in different ways. Try the exercises below at home (fast and slow contractions every hour and 'The Knack' before a cough/sneeze/lifting).

1. **Slow contractions** - squeeze your pelvic floor and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat five times.
2. **Fast contractions** - repeat the exercise 10 times quickly; squeeze for one second and release. Repeat five times.
3. **The Knack** - tighten your pelvic floor muscles before a cough/sneeze/lifting something heavy.

These exercises can be done while lying down, sitting, standing, or lying on your side. Start them while lying or side lying and progress to doing them sitting. **Try to repeat each exercise at least five times each day.**



**Diagram showing where the pelvic floor muscles are on a woman**

**We would advise women to continue these exercises throughout their life**

## Basic abdominal contractions

It is important after pregnancy to gently start using your abdominal (tummy) muscles in the correct way.

Before starting any further exercises (except pelvic floor exercises), make sure you have correctly practiced the following basic abdominal contractions. This exercise will reduce your risk of injury by strengthening the muscles that support your back. It will also help to reduce your risk of developing rectus diastasis (a gap between your tummy muscles), which can affect your ability to lift objects and exercise. Only start this exercise when you feel comfortable. For some women this will be straight away, others may want to wait a few days.

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor/bed (lie on your side if this is not comfortable).
2. Tilt your pelvis forwards and backwards, as if flattening and arching your back (see exercises 1 and 2). After five repetitions, rest in a neutral position (roughly the middle point between laying your back fully flat and a fully arched back).
3. Find your hip bones at the front of your pelvis and move your fingers one inch down and one inch in. Your fingers will be over your deep abdominal muscles (see exercise 3).
4. Breathe in and let your tummy rise. As you breathe out gently, draw your belly button in towards your spine. You should feel the muscles tense slightly under your fingers. Do not worry if this does not happen first time, keep practicing.
5. Once you are comfortable contracting these muscles, try practicing in different positions for example kneeling on all fours, standing and sitting.
6. Repeat this exercise twice a day.



**Exercise 1**



**Exercise 2**



**Exercise 3**

These muscles are used when we are standing, bending, or lifting.

If you are having difficulty contracting your deep abdominal muscles, do not worry this is completely normal.

## Gentle core exercises

Once you are comfortable doing the basic abdominal contractions, you can now move on to gentle core exercises. Below are some exercises to start before you return to your normal activities (work, exercise, housework, or gardening). Always make sure you are comfortable before you begin these exercises. Start with five repetitions of each exercise, a few times a day and build up slowly. Stop the exercises if you are feeling pain and ask your GP for a physiotherapy referral.

Be aware of your tummy; if you notice any 'bulging out' of your tummy when doing these exercises, you need to stop and return to the pelvic floor and basic abdominal exercises before continuing. If the bulging continues when you exercise then ask your GP for a referral to a women's health physiotherapist.

## Pelvic tilt

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor/bed.
2. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles while you flatten your back into the bed/floor (see exercise 4).
3. Breathe in and out. Tilt your pelvis forward to arch your back off the bed slightly (see exercise 5). Do not force this movement.
4. Repeat five to 10 times slowly. Your bottom should stay in contact with the floor/bed at all times.



**Exercise 4**



**Exercise 5**

## Knee rolls

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor (see exercise 6).
2. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and slowly roll both your knees to one side. Keep your knees together (see exercise 7).
3. Only move as far as comfortable. Return your knees to the middle and relax.
4. Repeat on the other side.



**Exercise 6**



**Exercise 7**

## One leg stretch

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the bed/floor (see exercise 8).
2. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and slowly slide one leg away from you (see exercise 9). Keep your heel on the bed/floor.
3. Breathe in and out. Keep your pelvic floor muscles tightened and slide your leg back up. Relax.
4. Repeat on the other side.



**Exercise 8**



**Exercise 9**

**Continue all these exercises until you have resumed your normal activities.**



## When can I resume my normal activities?

It is important to return to activities gradually, make sure you start off slower than you normally would for shorter periods of time. You can then build up the amount of exercise you do if your body feels okay.

- **Walking**

You can start walking once you feel comfortable. It is an easy form of exercise, but you must build up slowly.

- **Pilates/Yoga**

Mat based exercises can be started from two to four weeks. A gentler programme may be needed to start off with. Make sure you do not have a tummy bulge when doing any of the exercises. Pelvic floor and basic abdominal exercises need to be practised first. Always tell your instructor that you have recently been pregnant.

- **Swimming**

Swimming can be started usually around eight to 12 weeks if lochia (discharge after pregnancy) has stopped. It is easy to over-stretch in water, so start off with some gentle walking in the pool to warm up.

- **Cycling**

Cycling can be started after six weeks, if you feel comfortable.

- **Other exercises**

More strenuous activities, such as jogging or gym classes, should be considered after 12 weeks. Make sure you are confident doing pelvic floor and basic abdominal exercises first. It may be best to see a women's health physiotherapist before starting these activities. If you decide to take an exercise class, make sure you tell your instructor that you have recently been pregnant.

- **Sex**

Everyone is different, so you can start having sex again when you feel ready. A temporary lack of interest in sex is quite normal. Remember to use a contraceptive, as it is very easy to fall pregnant soon after pregnancy.

- **Lifting and housework**

Strenuous housework such as vacuuming, ironing, or cooking should be avoided until you are able to practice pelvic floor and basic abdominal exercises confidently without a tummy bulge. Ask for help from friends and family to start with and build up slowly.

## Most importantly

Take your time as you return to your pre-pregnancy level of activity. Every woman is different and each experience of pregnancy is unique. Try not to compare yourself with others, listen to your own body.

It is important for you to recover emotionally as well as physically, for some women exercise can help with this recovery. However, you should not feel any pressure to do more than you feel ready to. If you need more help with your physical recovery, speak to your GP about a referral to a women's health physiotherapist.

## Useful contacts

If you have any further questions please contact one of the following.

- **Dover Maternity Day Care, Buckland Hospital, Dover**  
Telephone: 01304 22 25 23
- **Canterbury Maternity Day Care, Kent and Canterbury Hospital, Canterbury**  
Telephone: 01227 78 31 05
- **Singleton Midwife-Led Unit, William Harvey Hospital, Ashford**  
Telephone: 01233 65 18 68
- **Folkestone Ward, William Harvey Hospital, Ashford**  
Telephone: 01233 61 66 28
- **Kingsgate Ward, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital, Margate**  
Telephone: 01843 23 51 37
- **St Peter's Midwife-Led Unit, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital, Margate**  
Telephone: 01843 23 51 00

**This leaflet has been produced with and for women and their families**

If you would like this information in **another language, audio, Braille, Easy Read, or large print** please ask a member of staff. You can ask someone to contact us on your behalf.

**Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments** please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 78 31 45, or email [ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net)

**Patients should not bring in large sums of money or valuables into hospital.** Please note that East Kent Hospitals accepts no responsibility for the loss or damage to personal property, unless the property had been handed in to Trust staff for safe-keeping.

**Further patient leaflets** are available via the East Kent Hospitals web site [www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/patientinformation](http://www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/patientinformation)