

Exercise and Advice After Your Baby is Born

Information for new mothers

Introduction

The following advice applies to all new mothers both after vaginal delivery and caesarean section. It includes a set of gentle safe exercises to aid your recovery.

While in hospital

Getting in and out of bed

- Bend your knees up one at a time
- Roll onto your side
- Move your legs off the side of the bed
- Gently push up through your arms to sit on the edge of the bed, supporting your tummy if needed



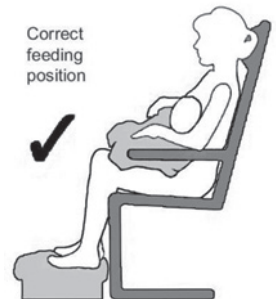
Do the reverse to get back into bed

Getting up from sitting

Move yourself close to the edge of the chair, push up to stand through your legs.

Feeding

- Sit in a comfortable chair with your back supported, you may benefit from a small pillow or a folded towel at your back.
- Use pillows on your lap to bring baby up to the level of your breast to avoid slouching
- Try to rest back with your shoulders relaxed when feeding
- Have your feet supported resting on the ground or on a footstool
- Ask for a suitable chair if needed
- Lying on your side can be a good alternative feeding position



Walking

Walk regularly (after the epidural wears off if you had one), this helps with blood flow and can help bowel function. Stand upright; try to avoid walking stooped as this can put strain on your back.

Bladder care

After a catheter is removed it is important that you pass urine within 4 hours, this will prevent overstretching of the bladder.

Try to pass urine every 2-3 hours when you are awake sometimes your bladder may not tell you when it is full during the first week following your delivery.

Seek assistance from the midwife if you have difficulties: passing urine / Getting to the toilet on time / Emptying your bladder

Bowel Care

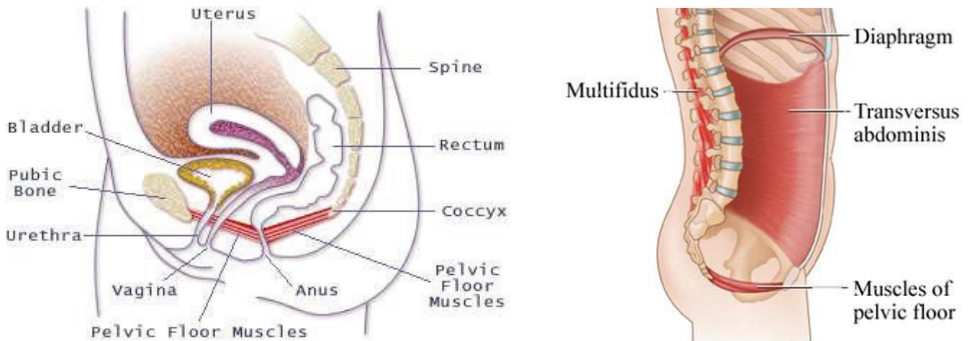
Following delivery and surgery many women have some trouble with constipation. The following tips may help avoid or relieve constipation:

- Drink 2 litres of fluid a day
- Eat meals regularly, trying not to miss meals
- Eat a balanced diet, with plenty of fruit and vegetables and fibre
- Don't delay, once you get the urge go to the toilet – putting off the urge can cause the bowel motion to become firmer and then lead to constipation
- Take your time on the toilet, don't rush
- Exercise can stimulate your bowels – walking
- Use laxatives for short term if required
- Sit on the toilet in a position which will aid emptying as shown
 - Feet flat, supported on step 4-6 inches high (toilet rolls in plastic bag)
 - Lean forward keeping your back straight
 - Have your elbows on your knees with your knees apart
 - Relax your tummy muscles and pelvic floor
 - As you breathe in your tummy should bulge out



Pelvic Floor Exercises

Pelvic floor muscles will be stretched and weakened with the extra weight of your baby through your pregnancy. After caesarean delivery it is still important to do pelvic floor exercises. After vaginal delivery it can be difficult initially to feel the right muscles, it is okay to start right away even if you have stitches. You can start these exercises once the catheter has been removed if you have one.



The pelvic floor muscles are made up of a number of layers of muscles which stretch from the front of your pelvis to the tail bone. They support your internal organs, so are working all the time.

The pelvic floor muscles help control your bladder and bowel function and prevent leakage of urine, faeces and wind. Strong pelvic floor muscles also enhance sexual function.

The diaphragm (your breathing muscle) and the pelvic floor work together, as you breathe in your pelvic floor should relax slightly and as you breathe out the pelvic floor naturally lifts, it is important to do the exercises with your breath.

Start the exercises in lying and progress to sitting and standing as you improve.

To build endurance and strength

- Start gently breathing in and out of your tummy.
- As you breathe out gently tighten and draw around your back passage as if you are stopping wind, then draw up your muscles at the front as if you are trying to stop passing urine
- Try to hold the lift as you breathe out. You may only manage a couple of seconds, with practice you can build to 10 seconds.
- It is important to feel the let go of the muscles as you relax otherwise you may over tighten the muscles or they may have relaxed without your awareness.
- Repeat 10 times. You may need a rest between each hold

To make muscles work quickly when you need them (cough, sneeze, laugh)

- As you breathe out tighten and draw in the pelvic floor muscles as above as strongly and quickly as you can and then let go.
- Aim for 10 in a row; a short break between each one can help initially.

Sometimes other muscles will try to switch on while doing the exercises but it is important that you:

- Do not squeeze your big muscles of your bottom
- Do not tighten your abdominal muscles
- Do not hold your breath

No one should be able to tell that you are doing the exercises.

Aim to do the exercises three times a day.

It takes three to six months to strengthen the pelvic floor, so don't be disheartened if the improvement is slow. Remember the pelvic floor muscles are like any other muscle in the body; they get weak if not exercised regularly; try to set up a routine that you can continue forever.

It is easy to forget to do exercises for muscles that you can't see.

To prevent leakage and pressure on the pelvic floor it is good to tighten the muscles before activities that put pressure on your pelvic floor for example coughing, sneezing or picking up your baby.

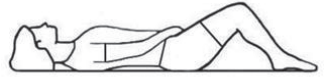
Exercises to do at home

Abdominal Muscles

The following exercises will help improve your abdominal tone and help to support good posture. Try exercises 10 times x3 times a day.

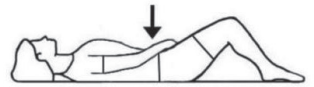
Deep abdominal exercises

- Lie on your back with your knees bent
- Place hands on the tummy below the belly button, breathe in and as you breathe out gently draw your pelvic bones together, gently drawing tummy away from your hand.
- Hold as you breathe out and relax as you breathe in.
- Progress as able to doing these exercises in sitting and standing



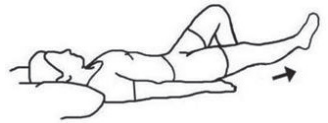
Pelvic Tilt

- Lie on back with knees bent
- Gently tighten your pelvic floor and lower tummy muscles and flatten your back into the bed as you breathe out
- Hold for 3-5seconds



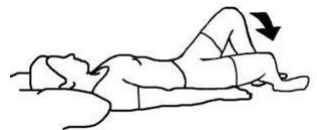
Leg slides

- Lie on your back with your knees bent
- As you breathe out gently tighten pelvic floor and lower tummy as you straighten out the leg, keeping the pelvis steady
- Breathe in as you bend the leg up again
- Repeat on other leg



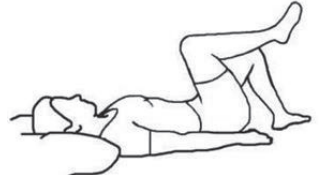
Single knee drop out

- Lie on your back with knees bent
- As you breathe out gently tighten pelvic floor and lower tummy as you move one knee out to the side keeping the pelvis steady
- Slowly bring leg back to the middle
- Repeat on other leg



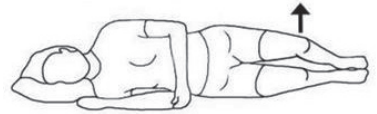
Hip bends

- Lie on your back knees bent
- Breathe in , as you breathe out gently tighten the pelvic floor and lower tummy as you bring you knee up
- Slowly lower down again
- Repeat on the other leg



Clam

- Lie on your side with your hips and knees bent
- Breathe in, as you breathe out gently tighten your pelvic floor and lower tummy, bring your knees apart keeping ankles together
- Try to keep your pelvis still through the movement
- Repeat on the other leg



Going home

Remember when you go home you will need time and rest to heal; so take your time gradually increasing your activity levels as you feel able.

Look after your back, try to stand as upright as possible

Changing and Bathing

- Adapt your working surface to waist height to reduce stooping over and developing backache
- You can kneel on the ground and change on the sofa
- Always remember not to leave your baby unattended in case they roll off



Lifting

- Avoid lifting anything heavier than your baby for six weeks
- To lift gently engage your pelvic floor and lower tummy as you breathe out. Bend from the hips; keep your back straight using your legs and buttock muscles to lift. Keep the load close to your body to reduce strain on your back.
- Avoid lifting toddlers, encourage them to climb up to you while you are sitting



Housework

- Avoid activities which cause strain to your abdomen and pelvic floor for the first few weeks e.g. prolonged standing
- In the first 6 weeks avoid vacuuming and heavy lifting e.g. full basket of wet washing

Return to sex

Sex can be resumed when you are ready, you may be more comfortable in a position that doesn't put extra pressure on your tummy if you had a caesarean delivery.

Return to exercise

- In the first 6 weeks mainly focus on gentle walking, your body is healing.
- After six weeks it is safe to return to swimming and low impact exercise gradually increase your fitness e.g. Pilates, low resistance gym work
- Do not return to high impact such as aerobics, running and resistance/weight training for a minimum of 12 weeks, even at this stage there will be hormones in the body that lead to increased elasticity in the tissue which can make it at higher risk to damage it is important to gradually increase exercise.
- If you have any urinary leakage with exercise or you have concerns about return to exercise seek help from a pelvic health physiotherapist to guide your return to exercise
- Remember it took you 9 months to get your body to where it is at delivery, it can take 12 months recover from pregnancy and delivery.

Separation of your abdominal muscles

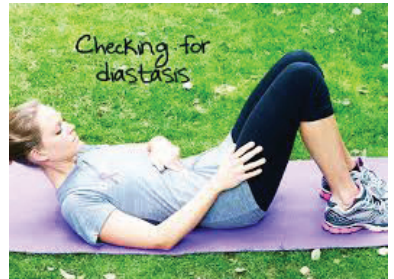
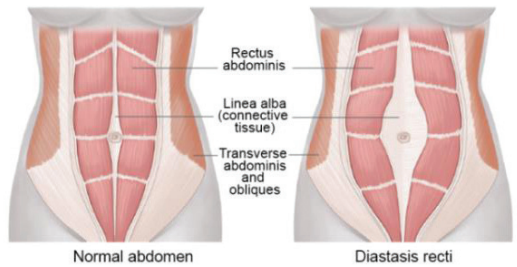
During pregnancy, as your baby grew your stomach muscles will have stretched along with this, in most women there will be a separation between the muscles.

This is normally 5cm and should resolve after birth. If at 8 weeks after delivery you have a 2-3cm gap or more you should seek help from a pelvic health physiotherapist or request a referral from your GP or midwife.

The stomach muscles support your pelvic organs and back. These muscles help prevent back pain, incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.

How to do a self-check of your abdominal muscles:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the bed
- Place fingers just above your belly button and gently press into your tummy
- Gently tighten your stomach muscles and lift your head off the bed
- You should feel the two bands of muscle at your fingers tighten. Test how many fingers you can get between the bands and how deep you can push in.



Additional advice for Caesarean section

Most women stay in hospital for 3-4 days. Early mobilisation following caesarean section is recommended and will support your recovery.

Pain relief

It is important to take pain relief at regular intervals so you are comfortable and able to move more easily

Coughing, sneezing and laughing

Additional support at your abdominal wound with a small pillow or a folded towel can help reduce pressure and discomfort at your wound.



Wound/Scar management

Massage is used to break up scar tissue, desensitise, relieve itching and move excess fluid. Unless otherwise advised, once your wound has healed you can begin gentle scar massage

- Lie flat on your back allowing the muscles to relax
- Gently massage a non-perfumed moisturiser into the scar 2-3 times a day to hydrate the skin and make it supple
- Use your finger in a circular motion slow but firm about 20-30 times more if the scar feels harder.

Helpful websites for further information

<http://www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au/>

<https://www.continence.org.nz/>

<https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/p/pelvic-organ-prolapse/>

<https://www.bladderandbowel.org/>

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**Tauranga Hospital 07 579 8000, Whakatāne Hospital 07 306 0999
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