

Patient information factsheet

Shape up after pregnancy

Your body's muscles will take time to recover following pregnancy and birth. To help you get back into shape there are some safe, easy and effective exercises that you can use.

This factsheet has been produced by midwives and obstetric physiotherapists. It provides exercises that are suitable for everybody post-delivery, even if you have had a caesarean section.

The speed with which your muscles recover will depend on how well you feel, and the type and amount of exercise you do. By actively working towards fitness you will feel better and may avoid future health problems. Please remember, it is important to start gently and progress slowly.

Pelvic floor exercises

Why your pelvic floor is important

Your pelvic floor muscles form a sling from the front to the back of your pelvis. They provide support to the organs within your pelvis and play an important role in your bladder, bowel and sexual functions.

Exercising your pelvic floor muscles will help to reduce initial bruising and swelling after birth. It can also prevent urine leaking from your bladder when you cough or sneeze.

Finding your pelvic floor

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. This is called a pelvic floor contraction.

The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift,' a closing and drawing together of your back and front passages. You should be able to feel the muscles move (a movement pulling away from your chair), your legs and buttocks should not move and you should not hold your breath. Please start gently and stop if it hurts.

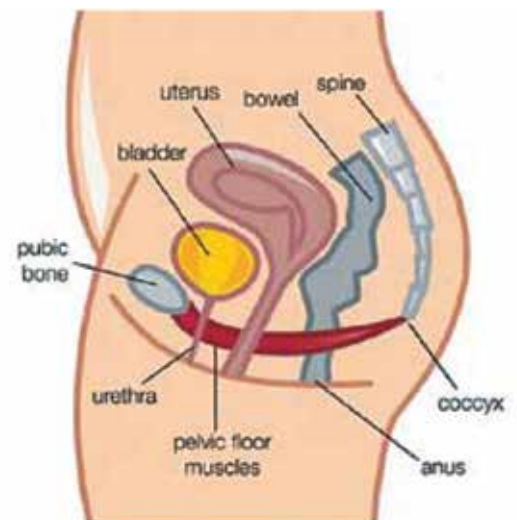
How to do pelvic floor exercises

Now that you have identified your pelvic floor, tighten your pelvic floor muscles and count for as many seconds as you can before the muscle starts to let go (maximum of ten seconds).

Record how many seconds you tightened your muscles

Release your muscles and rest for four seconds. Then repeat the 'tighten, hold and release' movement as many times as you can (up to a maximum of ten).

Record how many times you can repeat this



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Now perform the basic pelvic floor exercise but lift the muscles as quickly and strongly as you can and let go. This helps the muscles to react when you cough, laugh and sneeze.

Record how many you can do

By repeating these exercises three times a day your pelvic floor will get stronger. You will be able to increase your 'hold time' as well as the number of repetitions you can do.

Toning up your stomach

You can start to tone up your stomach muscles as soon as you feel well enough.

Your stomach has two main muscle groups. It is important to strengthen the deep group of muscles first as this will reduce the strain on your back and pelvic floor. Once these muscles are strong you can progress to the exercises which will strengthen your outer layer of muscles.

Following birth it is important you choose to exercise in a comfortable position, this may be sitting or lying down.

Deep muscle exercises

1. Let your tummy relax. Breathe in gently.
2. As you breathe out, gently draw in the lower part of your stomach, squeezing your pelvic floor as well.
3. Let go.

Don't move your back at any time. You should be able to breathe and talk while you exercise. Repeat this movement four or five times, with a few seconds rest between each one.

Aim to increase your muscle tone gradually, holding the muscles in for a maximum of ten seconds and repeating up to ten times.

After six weeks, ensure you can do these exercises while sitting and standing.

Tips for toning

- It is very important to use the deep stomach and pelvic floor muscles in everyday activities. Hold them in when you are lifting and carrying or doing housework. This reduces the strain on your back and pelvic floor muscles.
- Don't try any strong exercises such as sit-ups or lifting both legs when lying on your back as these may be harmful.

Once you are comfortably achieving the deep stomach exercise, you can move on to the pelvic tilt.

Pelvic tilt

1. Lie flat on your back with your knees in the air and perform the deep stomach exercise.
2. Gently squeeze your pelvic floor and buttocks, tilt your pelvis up and flatten your back on the floor or bed. Hold this position for a maximum of ten seconds, then release gently.

Tips for toning

- Keep your stomach flat.
- If it bulges go back to the deep stomach exercise and try the pelvic tilt again in a few days time.

The head lift

1. Perform the pelvic tilt.
2. Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles.
3. Lift your head only, hold for a few seconds, then release gently and rest for a few seconds.

You should not perform the head lift if you notice your tummy muscle bulging or if you have neck pain.

To progress

Once you feel confident with the head lift, you can progress by:

1. Prolonging the hold, up to a maximum of ten seconds. Keep breathing.
2. Raising your head and shoulders.

It may take several weeks before you reach this stage, particularly if you have had a caesarean section. This is nothing to worry about.

Remember

Don't forget to squeeze your pelvic floor muscles as you do the exercises. Do not continue if you cannot stop your stomach bulging as you exercise, particularly if you had a caesarean section. Do not exercise if you feel tired or are unwell.

Looking after your back

It is important that you take care of your back after you have given birth. Your back will be vulnerable for the first six months following delivery because increased hormone levels have weakened your stomach muscles and joints. Always find a comfortable, well-supported position before carrying out everyday activities.

Remember to tighten your pelvic floor and deep stomach muscles whenever you are lifting. Use your legs, bend your knees and get close to whatever you are picking up. This will help protect your back and pelvic floor.

Exercising for life

Many women choose to go back to sport two to three months after childbirth, but everyone is different. Exercise should always be undertaken gradually, particularly if you aren't used to it. It is important to progress at a pace that suits you.

More information can be found on the Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP) website:

pogp.csp.org.uk/publications/exercise-advice-after-pregnancy

Further advice

If you require any further information or advice within the first ten days following birth please contact the women's health physiotherapy team at the Princess Anne Hospital on **023 8120 8967**.

You should also ask your GP for advice if you have any of the following problems:

- persistent pain in your back, pelvis, pubic bone, groin or stomach.
- a stomach that remains bulging and floppy more than six weeks after birth.
- any problems with loss of bladder or bowel control such as wetting, soiling or having to rush to the toilet.
- difficulties with sexual intercourse.

If you experience any of these symptoms, a referral to the women's health physiotherapy team may be necessary.

For a translation of this document, or a version in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **023 8120 4688**.

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalneeds**