

Women's Health Care

Kingston Hospital  
NHS Trust



Post Natal  
Exercise  
and  
Advice  
Booklet



Easy exercises and advice to help  
you get back into shape after the  
birth of your baby

**PHYSIOTHERAPY DEPARTMENT**  
Patient Information (P'OC 2012)

**i) Start on the day your baby is born**

i) Movements for circulation and relaxation:

To help with circulation in the legs:

- In sitting or lying, bend and stretch your ankles upwards and downwards briskly, so that you can feel your calf muscles acting as a pump.
- Repeat regularly until you are up and moving about as normal.



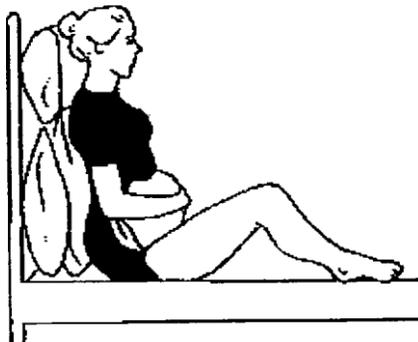
Start some deep breathing:

- Sitting with knees bent, rest your hand on your tummy.
- Take a slow deep breath in through the nose, feeling your chest expand and your tummy rise.
- Sigh out through your mouth as your tummy falls.
- Repeat 5 times

**Following a caesarean section**

If you need to cough, laugh or sneeze, the best position to do this in is either sitting up, or if lying, have your knees bent up.

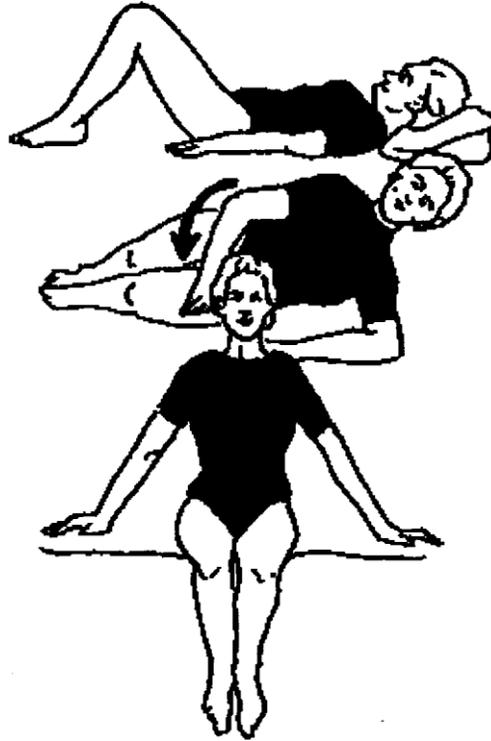
This position may help to make you more comfortable:



Support your stitches with your hands or a pillow as shown, try a forced breath out as if fogging up a mirror - a 'huff' rather than a cough.

**ii) Getting Out of Bed**

Getting out of bed will be easiest if you roll onto your side first



- Put your feet over the side of the bed as you push yourself up with your arms. Do the reverse to get back into bed.
- To move up the bed, roll onto your side and push with your hands and feet

**Remember:** Do not pull on the bed head or do a 'sit up'.

### **iii) Positions to Rest and Relax in**

Following a vaginal delivery you may wish to try this position:



- Lie on your tummy with one pillow under your upper body and one underneath your tummy
- This position is useful if you have: a painful, swollen perineum and/or stitches, haemorrhoids (piles), a painful tail bone or lower backache.

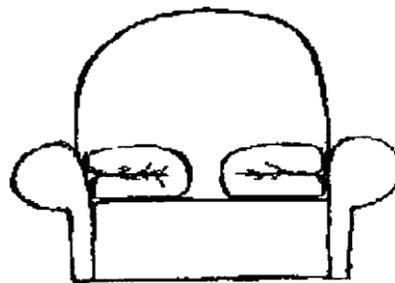
This position may be useful following a vaginal delivery or a caesarean section:



Lie on your side with one pillow under your tummy and one under your top leg.

### **Following a vaginal delivery**

If you have a painful or swollen perineum, episiotomy, tear, or haemorrhoids (piles), try sitting on pillows as shown. Fold each pillow in half and position so that a space is left between them.



## Caring for your back

Lower back pain is common during pregnancy. It is often a result of hormones causing the ligaments to soften and the increased weight gain. Though the pain may disappear after the birth, your back is still vulnerable to strain for the next 5 to 6 months because:

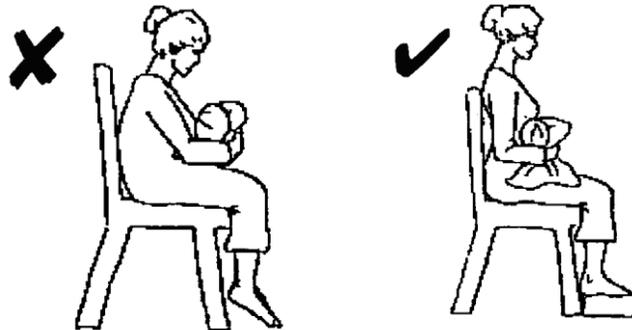
- **It will take 4-5 months after your baby is born for your ligaments to return to their normal strong state.**
- Your stomach muscles, which normally help to support the spine, are weak
- The increased hormones in your body make your joints more flexible putting them at greater risk of damage
- Caring for your baby will involve lifting, carrying, feeding and changing. All of which will put extra strain on your back.

### Everyday activities

You should try to look after your back by making sure all the activities you carry out frequently are done in comfortable, well-supported positions. Take the time to work out the best position to adopt when feeding, changing and lifting your baby. Here are some useful tips:

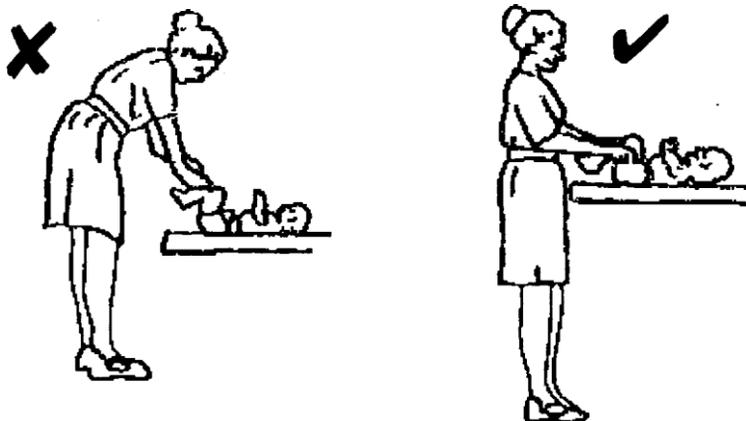
#### **Feeding:**

- Sit with your bottom well back in the chair so that your back is supported.  
You may find a small cushion or a rolled towel in the small of the back helps you sit more upright
- Rest your feet flat on the floor or on a low foot stool
- Place a pillow on your knees and use it to support your baby, keeping your shoulders relaxed
- You may also breastfeed whilst lying on your side. Your midwife or health visitor will be able to give you advice.



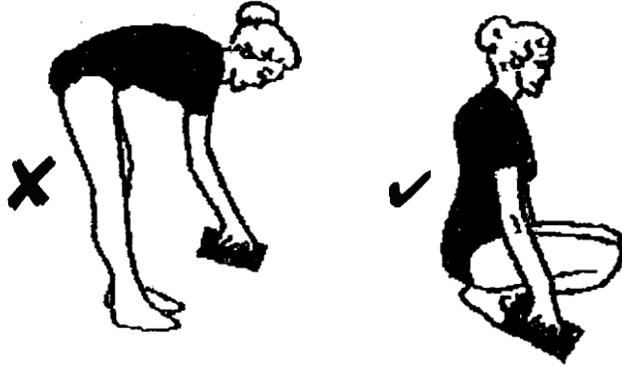
#### **Changing:**

- Ideally find a changing surface that is waist height
- Whether you sit, stand or kneel, remember not to stoop.

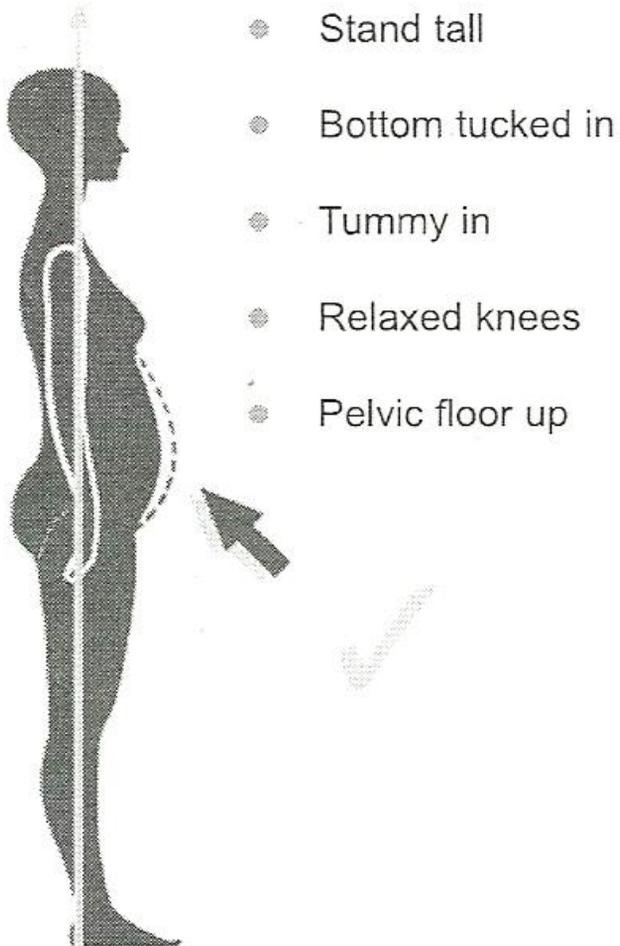


**Lifting:**

- Remember, whenever you are lifting, tighten your pelvic floor and deep abdominal muscles.
- Bend your knees, get close to the object you are picking up and use your strong leg muscles to stand up. This will help to protect your back and pelvic floor.
- Try and avoid heavy lifting initially. Gradually build up to more strenuous activities.

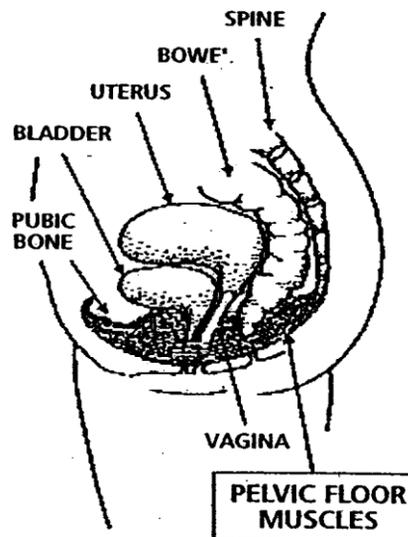
**Good Posture**

It is very important to maintain good posture at all times, do not allow yourself to slouch.



## The Pelvic Floor

The pelvic floor is a sling or hammock of muscle attached to the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis and to the tail bone at the back. Your muscles may have been stretched and weakened by pregnancy and childbirth. There are 3 openings in the muscle, for the bladder, vagina (birth canal) and the anus (back passage).



Firm, supportive pelvic floor muscles help support the bladder, womb and bowel, and to close the bladder outlet and back passage.

These exercises will help to:

- Improve the circulation to the muscle by reducing swelling which will help to relieve pain in the first few days after delivery
- Improve control of the bladder, preventing leakage of urine on Exertion e.g. coughing, running (**stress incontinence**)
- Maintain and improve the support of the pelvic organs to prevent prolapse
- Maintain and improve the enjoyment of sex

These exercises need to be started within a few hours of the birth of your baby, even if your muscles feel weak and sore. If you have a urinary catheter, start these exercises once it has been removed. If you have stitches, you can safely do these exercises.

### **How do I do pelvic floor exercises?**

Try the exercises lying and as it gets easier, you can progress to sitting and standing. Start by tightening the muscles around the back passage and then tighten and lift the muscles around the vagina and front passage. The sensation of lifting upwards and forwards is internal.

**Remember:** Try to isolate your pelvic floor as much as possible by not squeezing your legs together, not tightening your buttocks and not holding your breath. The lower tummy can very gently be drawn in as if pulling away from the zip of tight trousers. In this way most of the effort should be coming from the pelvic floor muscles.

Now you can do the basic pelvic floor exercise, you can use it to gradually tone up your muscles.

### **How many should I do?**

Everyone is different, so you can start with what you can do now. The following will help you to calculate what is right for you:

- **Long squeezes.** Tighten and squeeze your pelvic floor muscles, hold for several seconds, and then relax for several seconds. How long can you hold for? (aim for up to 10 seconds each)
- Repeat until your muscles start to tire. How many times can you repeat your long squeezes? (aim for up to 10 long squeezes)
- **Short squeezes:** Now contract and lift more firmly - hold for a second then let go. Repeat until your muscles start to tire. How many of these **quick/power contractions** can you do? (aim for up to 10 short squeezes).

Use this as your 'baseline' and try to exercise 4 to 6 times a day. By following these exercises, your pelvic floor will get stronger. Your baseline will gradually change as you increase your "hold time" and the number of repetitions you can do.

### **Memory Link**

Remembering to do the exercise can be difficult so the following tip may help you. Identify activities you do regularly such as:

- Feeding your baby,
- Changing a nappy,
- Listening to the news on the radio or television,
- Washing your hands.

Do the exercises as you do these activities.

### **Checking the strength of these muscles**

By 12 weeks, after the birth of your baby, these muscles should be returning to normal. At this stage, try this test:

#### **Position:**

Standing with feet apart (about 2 hours after passing urine so there is something in your bladder).

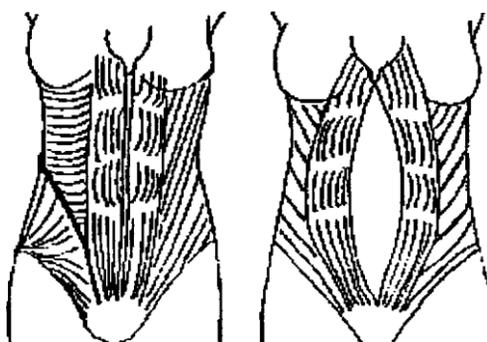
#### **Action:**

Jump up and down on the spot. Progress to doing the same exercise with a full bladder and with feet further apart. You should be dry. If you find you are damp or leak urine on coughing/running etc, continue with pelvic floor exercises and discuss with your GP who can refer you for physiotherapy assessment and treatment.

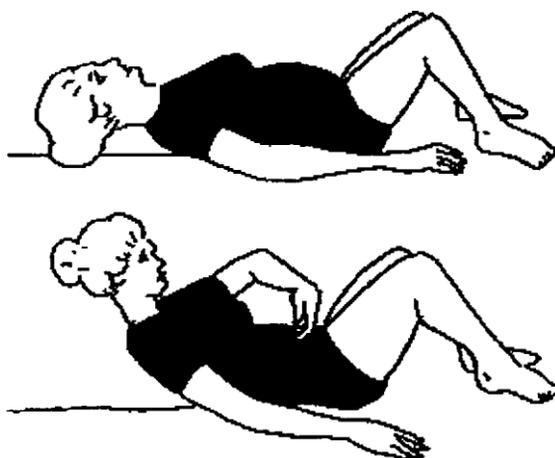
**This is an Exercise for Life**

### The Abdominal Muscles

The abdominal muscles are like two columns of muscle, which lie either side of the navel, and are joined by a fibrous band in the mid-line. During pregnancy this gap widens to allow the baby to grow. After delivery, the gap starts to close up but you must avoid movements which will further strain these muscles e.g. twisting, straining to get from lying by doing a sit up.



At about the 3rd day after your vaginal delivery, or the 5th day after your caesarean section, you can check for muscle separation. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Press the fingers of one hand firmly into your tummy muscles just above your tummy button (palm facing you). Then lift your head and shoulders slowly until your neck is about 8 inches from the horizontal. Breathe out as your head comes up. You will feel the bands of muscle on each side drawing together, pushing your fingers out of the way. It is important not to progress to Stage 3 of your abdominal exercises until the gap is approximately 1 to 2 fingers width (described on the next page). If the gap is 4-5 fingers or more you might be given some extra abdominal support or you could wear big knickers with medium control.



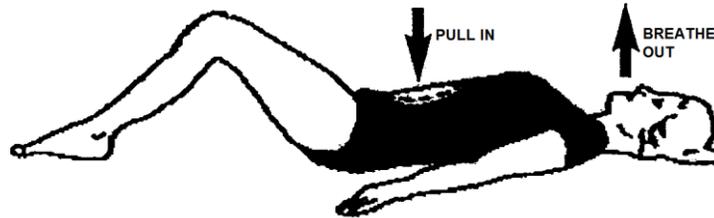
## **Exercising your Abdominal Muscles**

You can start to tone up your abdominal muscles as soon as you feel well enough, this may be as early as the day after the birth (even if you have had a caesarean section).

Three stages of exercises are outlined below. We advise that you begin by working the deep muscles described in Stage 1 as these will help to reduce the strain on your back and pelvic floor. Once you feel that they are strong enough, move on to Stage 2 to improve your outer muscles and finally to Stage 3. You would usually begin Stage 3, about 4 to 6 weeks after birth; however, this will vary from person to person. Aim to do your exercises 3 times a day.

### **Stage 1: The deep abdominals**

This exercise works the deepest abdominal muscles, which act like a corset to support your back and pelvis. It also helps flatten your stomach and draws in your waistline.



1. Lie comfortably on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the bed or the floor
2. Breathe in and let your tummy rise
3. As you breathe out, gently draw your lower tummy towards your spine
4. Hold for a count of 5, then let go

**Remember:** Do not move your back or hold your breath

Try different starting positions:

- Lying face down with a pillow under your stomach
- Lying on your side

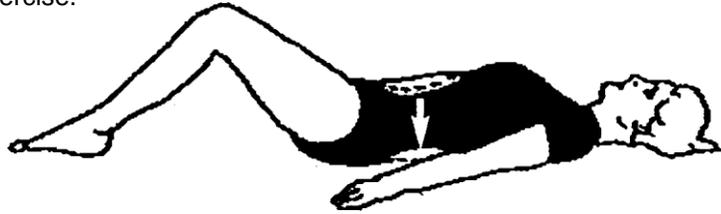
### **How many should I do?**

You should aim, initially, to repeat 5 times and build up gradually. Eventually you should try to hold for a maximum of 10 seconds and repeat 10 times. After six weeks you can do the exercise on all fours.

**Remember:** It is very important to use the deep abdominal and pelvic floor muscles in everyday activities. Hold them in while carrying your baby, lifting baby equipment and during housework. This will help to reduce the strain on your back.

**Stage 2: The Pelvic tilt**

Begin by performing the deep abdominal exercise.



1. Whilst drawing your tummy in, gently contract your pelvic floor and tighten your buttocks, tilt your pelvis up and flatten your back into the floor or bed.
2. Hold for a count of 5 then let go.

**How many should I do?**

Aim to build up gradually, repeating 5 to 10 times and holding for a maximum of 10 seconds.

**Remember:** Keep your tummy flat. Stop if you notice your tummy bulging and go back to Stage 1. Try Stage 2 in a few days.

**Stage 3: The head lift**

Begin by performing the pelvic tilt and contract your pelvic floor muscles.



As you breathe out, lift your head. Do not lift your shoulders to begin with. Hold for a few seconds, then release gently and rest for a few seconds

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

- Holding for longer- up to a maximum of 10 seconds and keep breathing
- Raising your head and shoulders.

**Remember:** The exercises should not cause you pain. Do them in a slow, controlled way and progress at a speed that suits you. Do not exercise if you feel tired or unwell.

**Your progression will depend on many factors:**

1. The strength of your muscles before pregnancy
2. The amount of discomfort you have
3. The type of delivery: after a caesarean section your progression may initially be slower to start with.
4. Avoid strenuous exercises like 'sit-ups' or lifting both legs up when lying on your back. These may be harmful.

### **Functional Integration of Abdominal Exercise**

Use this exercise during everyday activities.



### **Relaxation**

- Try to set aside 10 minutes each day in a well supported position, perhaps with your baby.
- Pull your shoulders down towards your feet for a few seconds and then release.
- Feel your neck stretched and shoulders further away from your ears than before.
- Stretch your fingers out long, and release. Feel your fingers long and your thumbs heavy.
- Breathe in slowly allowing your tummy to swell, then breathe out slowly.
- Enjoy that relaxed feeling as long as possible.

### **General exercise**

- Always start exercising gradually, and progress at a pace that suits you.
- Walking with your pram is good exercise at first. Gradually increase your walking distance and speed as you can.
- Swimming is excellent all round exercise (after bleeding has stopped).
- Pilates or yoga classes are excellent and may be started after six to eight weeks.
- Avoid other strenuous and high impact exercises during the first 12 weeks e.g. running, tennis, weights and sit-ups.