Postnatal Exercises and Advice

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Introduction

During pregnancy your body goes through many changes.

1. Your posture changes. As your centre of gravity moves forward, you get an increased curve in the lower part of your spine. Your shoulders have a tendency to be rounder and your chin pokes forward.

2. The ligaments which support your joints become softer and longer. You become more flexible, so it is easier to strain yourself.

3. You put on weight. As the baby grows, the uterus enlarges and your tummy muscles become stretched and weaker. Your pelvic floor muscles are put under strain as they try to support the enlarged uterus and the baby inside it. Your body lays down fat in preparation for breast feeding. Your body tends to retain fluid during pregnancy.

Following the birth of your baby many of these changes will return to normal automatically. The uterus will be almost back to its pre-pregnancy size by 6–8 weeks. The ligaments will have tightened up by six months. However, you will have to work at correcting your posture and strengthening your tummy and pelvic floor muscles.
Passing urine

It is important to pass urine within 2–3 hours of giving birth so that your bladder, which is less sensitive after delivery, is not over stretched and damaged. Try to pass urine every 2–3 hours during the day.

If passing urine is painful try pouring lukewarm water over the area as you go. This will dilute the urine and reduce the stinging.

It is quite normal not to open your bowels for 2–3 days after delivery. It is important to maintain good fluid intake (at least 1½ litres per day) to avoid constipation. Avoid a high fibre diet and eat plenty of soft fruit and vegetables for the first week.

If you have stitches, you may feel more comfortable if you pass urine first, then wrap tissue paper around your hand and support your stitches as you open your bowels. Resting your feet flat on a small box so that your knees are higher than your hips can also help to make opening your bowels easier.

To help prevent your stitches getting infected, wash your hands both before and after going to the toilet.

Circulation

It is important to help your circulation to prevent blood clots and relieve any swelling of your feet and ankles. Pump your feet up and down 20 times every 15 minutes. You can also circle your feet.

If you experience any pain, swelling or redness in your legs or any sudden shortness of breath with chest pain, you must see a doctor immediately as you may have a blood clot.
Remember, pelvic floor exercises are for life!

Your pelvic floor muscles

It is common to experience bladder and bowel problems during pregnancy and following delivery. Physiotherapy is able to offer a variety of treatments that can significantly help.

The pelvic floor muscles are a ‘hammock’ of muscles attached at the front of the pelvis to the pubic bone. They go between the legs and attach to the base of the spine.

They help to support the internal organs and stop them dropping down (known as a prolapse). They help to control your bladder and bowel, and stop you leaking urine, wind or faeces. They also have a role in sexual arousal and performance.

During pregnancy the pelvic floor is stretched by the weight of the baby in the uterus. A hormone called relaxin, which is released during pregnancy, also has an effect on the pelvic floor muscles making them weaker. During a vaginal delivery the muscles and nerves that supply the pelvic floor muscles are stretched a great deal as the baby comes down through the pelvis.
Basic pelvic floor exercises

1 To strengthen the muscles you need in order to help prevent a prolapse:
   Close your back passage as though to stop yourself passing wind. At the same time close your front passage as though to stop yourself passing urine. As you close and tighten up half way, you should feel a lifting inside you. Try to hold the lift for four seconds and then relax. Repeat five times. Aim to increase the hold up to 20 seconds.

2 To strengthen the pelvic floor muscles to help stop you leaking when you cough and sneeze, etc:
   Close your back passage as though to stop yourself passing wind. At the same time close your front passage as though to stop yourself passing urine. As you close and tighten up as much as you can you should feel a lifting inside you, then relax. (In effect you are doing a quick squeeze.) Repeat five times.

Try to do these exercises every time you do a particular activity, for example when feeding your baby. Aim to do each set of pelvic floor exercises 4–6 times a day.

Also try to pull up your pelvic floor before and during activities which may cause you to leak urine, such as coughing, sneezing, running, etc.

You can do pelvic floor exercises lying down, sitting, kneeling, standing or walking.

Do not:
   1 hold your breath;
   2 use your tummy muscles; or
   3 use your buttock muscles

as these will increase the pressure in your tummy producing a bearing down force on the pelvic floor muscles which will weaken rather than strengthen them.

If you are sore or swollen or have stitches, do 10 quick squeezes every 15–20 minutes as this will relieve pain and reduce swelling and bruising.

To check if you are doing the exercises properly: Try to stop or slow down the flow of urine towards the end of your stream; then relax and allow your bladder to empty completely. This is a test and should only be done once a week, as if performed often may cause cystitis.
Your tummy muscles
These are very important for protecting your spine and maintaining a good posture. Pelvic tilting is a gentle and safe exercise. Start the day after your baby is born.

Exercise 1: Pelvic tilting
This exercise can help to relieve back pain.

Lie on your back on the bed with your knees bent and your feet resting on the bed. Pull in your tummy muscles, and at the same time tuck your bottom in, thereby rocking your pelvis forwards and flattening your back into the bed. Hold for 3–5 seconds then relax. Repeat 10 times, three times a day. You can also do this exercise sitting or standing.

Exercise 2: Strengthening the deep tummy muscles.
The deep tummy muscles act like a corset and stabilise the spine and pelvis, flattening your stomach.

To work the deep tummy muscles, lie or sit in a comfortable position. Try to focus on your lower tummy muscles, which lie below your navel. As you breathe out, gently try to pull your lower tummy muscles up and in to flatten your tummy, at the same time pull up your pelvic floor. Hold this for as long as you can, building up to 10 seconds and repeat 5–10 times, three times a day.

Try combining exercises 1 and 2 together.
Separation of the recti muscles

As the baby grows during pregnancy, your tummy muscles are stretched and lengthened. In most women the connective tissue which helps to hold the tummy muscles together is stretched and the muscles separate. You don’t feel them separate because they don’t have a nerve supply.

To check the width of your gap, lie on your back with your knees bent up with feet resting on the bed. Place the fingers of one hand widthways down into your abdomen at the level of your tummy button. Lift your head and shoulders up like a half sit-up. You should be able to feel the gap which narrows as you start to sit up. If you have a very wide gap you may need to use both hands to check.
Exercises for abdominal support

Exercise 3: Transversus abdominis activation
Cross your hands over your ribs to give them support and prevent them flaring out.

Lie flat on your back with your knees bent up and your feet flat. Tighten up your pelvic floor and then draw your tummy muscles towards your spine. Aim to start these exercises within 24 hours after delivery.

Repeat 10 times, 5 times a day, hold for 3 seconds.

You can practise this lying down, sitting or standing.

After a week progress to:

Exercise 4: Knee drops
Lie flat on your back with your knees bent up and your feet flat. Slowly let each knee drop outwards then bring your knees together again.

Exercise 5: Heels slides
Lie flat on your back with your knees bent up and your feet flat. Slowly bend one knee towards you and then slide it back down to straight.

Exercise 6: Arm raises
Lie flat on your back with your knees bent up and your feet flat, slowly raise your arms above your head then slowly lower them again.

Repeat 10 times, 3 times a day.
Progression

- Heel slides with your foot raised off the floor by 2–3 cm (1 inch).
- Combine foot, arms raises and heel slides together using alternate arm and leg.

Do not exercise when you are tired.

Have a rest every day.

Good posture is important – ‘walk tall’ pulling in your tummy muscles and pelvic floor muscles.

Exercise 7: Hip hitching

Lie on your back with one knee bent and one knee straight. You are working the straight leg. Point your toes to the ceiling. Stretch your heel down towards the bottom of the bed so your leg lengthens. Then, keeping your knee straight and your leg resting on the bed, hitch up from your hip making your leg short. Repeat 10 times for each leg, 2–3 times a day.
Back care following the birth of your baby

Looking after your back after you have your baby is very important. Your back is very vulnerable for six months after the birth due to:

1. your tummy and pelvic floor muscles being stretched and weakened;
2. your joints being more flexible due to the supporting ligaments being softened by the hormone relaxin; and
3. caring for your baby involves a lot of carrying and lifting.

Changing and bathing

Don’t bend and stoop over the baby. Change and bathe your baby on a surface which is the right height for you. Babies can roll – do not leave them unattended on a raised surface.

Do not change your baby on the floor while sitting with your legs out straight – kneel instead.

Feeding

Place a thin cushion behind your waist and a pillow on your lap so your baby is at the right height to feed without you having to slouch. Support the arm cradling your baby on the pillow. Sit well back into the chair and have a low stool for your feet.

Lying on your side is often a very comfortable position to feed in.
**Lifting**
Avoid low cots. Always bend your knees, keep your back straight and hold your baby close to you when you pick him or her up.

**Returning to sport postnatally**
It is safe to swim again following your six-week check-up. Low impact exercise is also safe to resume after 6–8 weeks, for example: yoga, jogging, horse riding. High impact exercise such as aerobics, step, running going to the gym and competition horse riding can be resumed after 12 weeks. Returning to high impact exercises too soon can result in a vaginal prolapse.

**Sexual intercourse**
It is advisable not to have sexual intercourse until your bleeding has stopped. Avoid all positions on all fours until six weeks postnatally. It is possible to get pregnant again two weeks after giving birth so contraception needs to be considered.

**Free postnatal exercise class**
If you would like to join our postnatal exercise class please ring the above number after your six-week check. It’s free and babies are welcome.

**Electrotherapy**
Electrotherapy is available to help with swelling, bruising, painful stitches, haemorrhoids and can help with tissue healing.

If you feel you need further help, please contact us on 01473 703522.
If you require further information or advice, please contact us at:

Physiotherapy Department (FINN Clinic)
9th Floor Maternity Block
Ipswich Hospital
Heath Road
Ipswich
IP4 5PD

Telephone: 01473 703522
Monday–Thursday, 8.30 am–5.30 pm
(Answering machine available outside of these hours)

If you have any back pain, pelvic pain, painful stitches, pain on intercourse or pelvic floor problems, you can self-refer to the department up until your baby is six months old. After this time please contact your GP for a physiotherapy referral.