



London Health Sciences Centre

Patient Information

POSTPARTUM EXERCISE

Exercise after having a baby has many benefits such as improved cardiovascular fitness, facilitating weight loss, increased energy, and improved psychosocial well-being. It is safe to exercise while you are breastfeeding.

General Guidelines:

- Exercise slowly and smoothly: do not hold your breath
- Relax and breathe deeply between exercises
- Drink plenty of fluids (exercise requires extra fluids and calories)
- Gradually increase the length and intensity of your exercise program and avoid long sessions
- Stop exercising if you feel pain, light headedness, dizziness, and/or nausea
- If your vaginal flow returns to bright red bleeding, stop exercising and take a slower pace next time
- Slowly increase how often and how long your exercise
- Tighten your abdominal muscles when lifting to avoid abdominal bulging or any straining. (*Do not lift anything heavier than your baby (and car seat) for the first 6 weeks, especially following caesarean birth)

Exercises to AVOID during the first six weeks

- Knee-chest pull-ups
- Bridging (lying on your back and lifting your buttocks up)
- Double leg raises, abdominal crunches or full sit-ups
- Abdominal muscle exercises should be chosen with care and exercises requiring twisting should be avoided (such as oblique curls)

For women who have had a vaginal birth

- Most types of exercise can be continued or resumed. However, with the added fatigue from giving birth and caring for your baby you may need to reduce the intensity or length of your exercise sessions
- Relaxation, breathing, stretching and pelvic floor exercises, are safe to start right after having your baby
- Low intensity aerobics and low impact exercise programs can also be safe.
- Start slowly with strengthening exercises for the back and legs and core exercises that do not put a lot of pressure on your pelvic floor (planks are best. When doing a plank it is best to keep your knees on the ground)

For women who have had a caesarean birth

- Walking is encouraged, try to stand and walk tall
- Activities at home for the first week should be limited to personal care and care of your infant. By the third to fourth week, most activities at home can be resumed
- A moderate intensity aerobic exercise program and abdominal exercises should be delayed until after your 6 week postpartum check-up

Care must be given to your incision site

- Stretching your abdomen should be avoided until your incision is healed
- When you cough, sneeze or laugh, protect your incision by placing either your hand or a pillow across your incision
- When you rest and sleep on your side you may want to use a small pillow or towel to support your stomach
- When transitioning from lying to sitting, or getting out of bed, roll onto your side first, then press up using your arms to avoid straining your incision and abdominal wall

What is Safe?

Pelvic floor muscle exercises - Kegels

Pelvic floor exercises strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. Doing these exercises will help to heal any perineal stitches you may have, decrease hemorrhoids and pain, increase blood supply and help restore bladder function and may help to decrease the incidence of urinary stress incontinence (leaking of urine). These exercises can be done when you are lying, sitting, or standing. This exercise should be done daily throughout your life to maintain the tone of the muscles that help to support the uterus and bladder.

- Contract the perineum as if to stop urine flow and the passage of gas at the same time
- Hold the position and count to five, then relax
- Repeat five times at first, then increase to 10-15 times when you feel stronger
- Complete this exercise routine 2-3 times a day

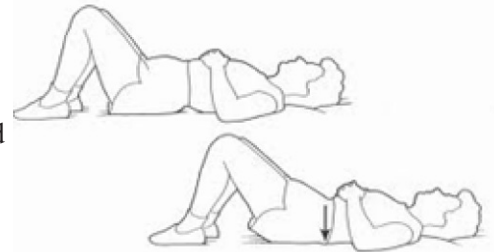


Breathing Exercises

The presence of the baby tends to limit the movement of the lower part of your lungs and breathing tends to be shallow. Breathing exercises are important for lung re-expansion and relaxation. Breathe deep into your belly three times per day while lying, sitting or standing

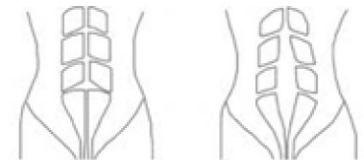
Pelvic Tilt

Pelvic tilting exercises can help to improve posture and relieve backache. Lying on your back with your feet flat on the floor, tighten your abdominal muscles and push the small of your back so it is flat across the floor. Hold and count to 3 and then relax. Repeat 5 times and when you are able increase this number. It can also be done sitting or standing and pressing the small of your back into a wall or chair.



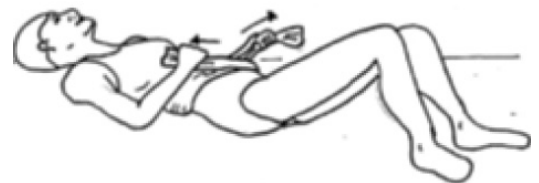
Abdominal muscle separation (Rectus Diastasis)

Before doing more advanced abdominal exercises, it is important to check for separation of the rectus abdominal muscles. This muscle is really two halves that can often separate due to the size of the baby and the birthing process.



How to check for abdominal muscle separation

Lie on your back and bend your knees, with your feet flat on the floor. Slowly bring your chin to your chest and look at your knees without lifting your shoulders off of the ground. With your fingers check for a gap or a bulge in the middle of your abdomen just at, above or below your belly button.



If there is a gap (soft region) wider than the width of two fingers, avoid further separation by not doing any abdominal crunches, twisting of your trunk or sitting straight up without rolling to the side. Continue with the low intensity pelvic tilt and kegel exercises until you can only fit 1 finger in the gap. You can also help to strengthen your abdominal muscles and close this gap by doing the following exercise. Lie on your back with your feet flat on the floor. Cross your hands over the abdominal area or use a towel to support and bring the muscles together. Then as you breathe out, slowly raise your head and shoulders off the floor until just before the bulging of the muscle appears. Hold for 5 seconds and slowly lower. Build up to doing this 10 times, 3 times a day.