

## POSTNATAL EXERCISE ADVICE

### Exercise precautions

#### C-section

A c-section is major abdominal surgery and it will take around 6-8 weeks for good levels of healing to take place. During that time you should limit lifting to no heavier than the weight of your baby for 3-4 weeks, and not lift anything that causes you to strain for 3-4 weeks after that. Anything that exercises the abdominals too aggressively should not be done in the first 6-8 weeks and sit-ups are not advisable until a very good level of strength has returned.

#### Hypermobility

Pelvic stability is affected even more during and after pregnancy in women who are hypermobile. Return to high impact exercises such as running should be done more gradually and with caution.

#### Pelvic/bladder/bowel symptoms

If you have any significant dragging/heaviness sensation in the area between your legs, bladder or bowel incontinence, do not engage in any heavy lifting (i.e. where you feel yourself bracing in your abdomen when you lift) and continue to do the pelvic floor exercises regularly. Seek further advice if the problem persists.

#### Separation of stomach muscles

The line down the middle of your stomach where the abdominal muscles meet can sometimes separate during pregnancy. You will notice "doming" of your abdomen when you do a crunch type movement. This will generally improve on its own over the first 8 weeks postnatally. To help improve it further, concentrate on the abdominal contraction exercise and avoid sit-up type movements as much as possible.



### General Exercise Advice

(See separate exercise sheets for more detailed exercise information)

Every delivery and every postnatal body is different. These are general guidelines for exercise advice. If you are unsure or it doesn't feel right, please seek advice.

To do following all deliveries (see overleaf):

1. Pelvic floor exercises
2. Abdominal contractions

Following an "uncomplicated" delivery:

0-12 weeks - low impact exercises to strengthen pelvic muscles and improve abdominal stability.

After 12 weeks and after doing a minimum of 6 weeks of strengthening you can progress to higher impact exercises. Take your time and progress slowly to avoid injury. Running is a high impact exercise and should be one of the last things that you return to.

Following a complicated delivery or c-section:

It is advisable to wait until 4-6 weeks before commencing starting the strengthening program and then delay the return to impact exercises till a minimum of 16 weeks.

# Pelvic floor exercises

Your pelvic floor muscles have given you support throughout your pregnancy and may be weaker due to the extra weight carried during pregnancy and labour. It is important that pelvic floor exercises are completed by all women throughout life, regardless of your type of delivery. By exercising these muscles, you can help prevent future weakness which can lead to incontinence and prolapse.

After a vaginal birth it is normal to feel discomfort and your bladder function may take a number of weeks to return to normal. Try and start your pelvic floor exercises as soon as you can after delivery but you must only do so within comfort and so they must not cause you any pain. If you have a catheter you must not begin pelvic floor exercises until it has been removed.

## ***How to do a Pelvic Floor Contraction***

- 1) Tighten the muscles around the back passage as if trying to hold in wind.
- 2) Hold that contraction and feel the contraction spread forward so that you are now also trying to stop the flow of urine mid-flow.
- 3) You should feel the area in-between your legs tighten and slightly lift.
- 4) Hold this contraction for either a long squeeze or short squeeze (see below)
- 5) Relax for a few seconds before you do another repetition.

## ***Your home programme***

Aim to complete one set (long squeezes and short squeezes) of pelvic floor exercises approximately 4 times per day. A good idea is to try to do a set whenever you feed your baby. At six months post-delivery, aim to continue your pelvic floor exercises at a maintenance level of one set daily. The exercises can be done in different positions in order to progress the difficulty, the easiest is lying, slightly more difficult is in sitting and the hardest position is standing.

## ***Long squeezes***

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold them as tightly as you can for 5 seconds, then release and let them fully relax for 5 seconds. Repeat this squeeze and relax sequence between 3-10 times until you feel the muscles tire.

Over the next 3-6 months try to gradually increase to a 10 second hold.

## ***Short squeezes***

Pull up the pelvic floor muscles quickly and tightly, then immediately let go fully. Aim for 10 repetitions in a row if you can but if this is too much then just start with 2 or 3 and gradually build up from there.

During a cough, sneeze or during lifting activities, always tighten your pelvic floor to support the pelvic organs.

If you experience any abdominal or pelvic pain during or after exercising these muscles please discuss this with your midwife, pelvic health physiotherapist or GP.

# Abdominal contractions

Your abdominal muscles form a natural corset supporting your back and internal organs. These muscles become very stretched and weakened during pregnancy, so this support in the postnatal period is very weak. It is a good idea to exercise and strengthen them as soon as possible.

To exercise your deep abdominal muscles lie on your back with your knees bent. Take a breath in and as you breathe out gently draw in your lower abdominal muscles (imagine you are pulling your belly button towards your spine).

This should be a small movement. Repeat a few times and as you feel more confident with this exercise you can aim to hold the contraction for up to 10 seconds and aim to repeat up to 10 times, three times a day. You may prefer to do this exercise lying on your side or sitting up. You can gradually start using this hollowing movement with your normal daily activities such as lifting, bending or walking.