

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS ABOUT

Advice and Exercises Following Caesarean Birth

ADVICE FOLLOWING CAESAREAN BIRTH

During pregnancy and labour your body undergoes change. As the uterus grows the supporting structures (muscles, ligaments and fascia) stretch to accommodate both the growth and delivery of your baby. The stretching of your stomach muscles and the vaginal canal can lead to weakening of the pelvic floor. This can then lead to symptoms of incontinence and prolapse (weakening of the vaginal wall, which can cause it to feel heavy).

During a Caesarean birth an incision is made to the lower abdominals and womb, just below your bikini line. You may experience discomfort for the first few weeks and likely offered painkillers to help with this. The wound in your lower abdominals will eventually form a scar. This may be obvious at first, but it should fade with time. You may feel altered sensation such as stinging or numbness, this is normal. To prevent and manage these symptoms it is suggested that women follow the advice below:

Following the birth of your baby, your body needs time to recover and heal. Although you will most likely be active in tending to your baby's needs, you need to remember to rest and perform gentle exercises to promote healing in order to be stronger in the long term.

During the first 6 – 12 weeks following the birth of your baby, the advice is to rest, take gentle exercise, listen to your body, avoid lifting (with the exception of your baby), to develop awareness of your posture, and to form good postural habits.

To help reduce any altered sensation in the abdomen and recover feeling, you can gently pat over the incision with a clean towel when getting out of the shower. Once the incision has healed and the risk of infection has passed, gently massage around the incision and across it to help break down scar tissue and reduce sensitivity and numbness.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION - Rest aids recovery!

- With the exception of your baby, minimal lifting is advised for 6 weeks, and not lifting anything heavy for 12 weeks.
- Try to avoid activities that cause strain for the first 6 weeks, such as prolonged standing and housework.
- Avoid movements that involve leading with your head, for example, getting out of bed by sitting up first. It is better to roll onto your side first, and use your hands to push yourself into an upright position.
- Start with gentle exercises to promote healing and strength.
- When having a bowel movement do not strain or rush.

COMFORT

- Make sure that you are well supported. This is good for your back and abdominals, and can help you feel less sore.
- Try placing a small pillow or roll in the “small” of your back and under your knees for increased comfort.
- When lying on your side try using pillows between your knees for support.



- Bending one or both knees up from time to time may help to relieve discomfort. Whether breast or bottle-feeding, pillows can be used to raise baby up, which can help protect your stitches.
- Placing pillows under the arm that supports the baby’s head can improve your posture and reduce discomfort in the back and shoulders.
- When sitting, ensure that your feet rest on the floor, or on a small stool to reduce pressure on your abdomen.

BREATHING EXERCISES

When you are not as active as normal, it is important that you keep your chest clear, especially if you have had an anaesthetic. Breathing exercises can help with this:

- Take a deep slow breath in through your nose
- Hold for a count of two
- Sigh the air out of your mouth

Repeat this three times. Do this regularly until you are up and about.

If you feel the need to cough something up, the least painful and most effective way is to ‘huff’ (a short forced breath out through your mouth, like steaming up a mirror). Coughing, laughing and sneezing can increase your pain. To help reduce the discomfort of these actions use a folded towel, pillow or your hands to apply gentle pressure over your incision, and lean forwards.



GETTING MOVING

It is important to start moving as soon as you can. These gentle exercises will help to improve your circulation and reduce any swelling in your legs.

- Briskly pump your feet by pointing toes up towards you, and then pointing them away for 20-30 seconds.
- Move your ankles by making large circular movements. Repeat 10 times.

Start immediately, and repeat hourly throughout the day and continue until you are up and walking.

Avoid sitting or lying with your legs or ankles crossed, as this may restrict the blood flow. Avoid standing still for long periods.

TURNING IN BED

- Bend your knees up one at a time while keeping your feet in contact with the bed.
- Then, roll onto your side, using your top arm to hold onto the side of the bed, if needed, to help the turn.



GETTING IN AND OUT OF BED

- Bend your knees up one at a time while keeping your feet on the bed.
- Roll onto your side, keeping the knees bent.
- Ease your legs down off the bed and use your hands by pushing into the bed to bring yourself up into a seated position.
- Using one hand to support the abdomen, shuffle your bottom to the edge of the bed. Engage your pelvic floor muscles, and, leading with your head, lean forwards and use your free hand to push up into standing. Reverse this for getting back into bed.



EXERCISE

'The Rules'

- Listen to your body
- Stop when it hurts/tired
- Never exercise if feeling unwell
- Continue these exercises when you return home

ONLY start pelvic floor exercises once the catheter has been removed (if you had one), and when you have passed urine three times without problems.

ENGAGING YOUR CORE

The stretching and weakening of the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy, combined with hormonal changes in the body, can increase movement of the joints and lead to pain. To help manage this, and optimise recovery, it is advised that you increase the strength and tone of your abdominal muscles by using the following exercises to strengthen your core.

Transverse Abdominus

The first two exercises can be done lying down, or in a seated position with both feet on the floor.



- Lie down on your back with your knees bent and feet in contact with the floor/bed.
- Check to make sure that your ribs are down, not flaring outwards.
- Take a gentle breath in, to prepare. Towards the end of your outward breath, gently draw the lower stomach muscles in towards the spine.
- Maintain that position, with the muscles activated for five seconds and then release (keep your breathe flowing).
- Aim to repeat 8-10 times per session.

Pelvic Tilt



- Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet in contact with floor/bed.
- Activate your stomach muscles, as in the exercise above, and press the small of your back against the supporting surface. Tilt your hips so that your bottom tucks under. Hold this for up to 5 secs (keeping the breath flowing), and then release. Aim to repeat this up to 10 times per session.

Four Point Kneeling



- Start on your hands and knees, with wrists aligned underneath your shoulders, and knees underneath your hips.
- As in the exercises above, towards the end of your outward breath, gently draw the stomach muscles in towards your spine. You should feel a gentle lift of your stomach muscles.
- Hold this position for 3-5 flowing breaths. Release and repeat up to 10 times.

Mini Squat



To modify:
Hold on to the back of a chair/supportive surface.

- Standing tall, with good posture. Step your feet a little wider than hip width and toes pointing forwards.
- Bend your knees and squat (sticking your bottom out as though to sit in a chair). At the same time extend your arms out straight in front of you. Take care that the knees are in-line with the second toe, but do not go forward of the toes.
- Activate your glutes (squeeze your bottom cheeks) and return to standing.

Repeat this 5-10 times and aim to do 3 sets of 10, as able.

PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES

When to start: Only start these exercises once your catheter has been removed, and you have passed urine more than three times without difficulty.

What and where are the Pelvic Floor Muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles form the floor of your pelvis. They attach to the pubic bone at the front of your pelvis and to the coccyx at the back. They support your pelvic organs and control the front and back passages, giving you control as to when you pass urine and open your bowels.

The muscles stretch during pregnancy and may be stretched further during delivery. If the muscles remain weak, there is an increased risk of incontinence and vaginal or uterine prolapse.

There are two muscle fibre types in the pelvic floor: fast twitch and slow twitch. They each have a different function. The fast twitch fibres activate quickly to prevent the leakage of urine when, for example, you laugh, cough or sneeze.

The slow twitch fibres help you to “hold on” when you get the urge to go to the toilet.

Because of this, the pelvic floor has two exercises – short (squeeze and release) and long (squeeze and hold). By exercising the pelvic floor regularly, you will increase its strength.

You might find that after giving birth you are only able to do a few pelvic floor exercises. This is because the muscle is fatigued and the strength needs to increase over time, with daily repetitions over the weeks, months and years!

If you have stitches, you can still do these exercises. They can help promote healing by reducing the swelling and increasing blood flow to the area. Start gently.

How to Exercise Your Pelvic Floor

Exercise 1 – Squeeze and Hold

Step 1

Sit, stand or lie comfortably with your knees slightly apart.

Step 2

Gently breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, tighten the muscle around your back passage as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. Now tighten the muscles around your front passage as if you are trying to stop yourself passing urine. Aim to hold both back and front pelvic floor muscles tight for 5-10 seconds (without holding your breath). The feeling is one of “squeeze and lift”, and you should feel your lower abdomen draw in slightly.

Fully relax for 4 seconds and aim to repeat up to 10 times.

When doing the exercises, avoid tightening your buttocks and squeezing your legs together.

Exercise 2 – Squeeze and Release

In the same position as Exercise 1, gently breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, tighten the back and front pelvic floor muscles for a short, strong squeeze and, as you breathe in, relax the muscles fully.

Aim to build up to doing 10 short squeezes up to 10 times without holding your breath.

Aim to repeat both long and short squeezes 3-6 times a day.

Your starting point: this is the maximum number of seconds you can hold your contraction for (up to 10 seconds) and the maximum times you can repeat this (up to 10 repetitions). Build up your exercise routine gradually. You should notice an improvement in the first three months (this can sometimes take longer). Aim to progress the position you do your exercises in from side lying, to sitting, to standing and, over time, practise them whilst doing activities such as walking and bending.

Keep practising your pelvic floor muscle exercises twice a day to maintain the improvement.

Tips to Help You Remember to do The Exercise:

Try to make the exercises part of your daily routine. Perhaps do them at the same time as another activity, such as brushing your teeth / when washing your hands/ when sitting on the toilet after emptying your bladder.

Additional suggestions:

- Try downloading an app on your phone such as the NHS Squeezy app.
- Put a reminder on your phone or set an alarm

Please do not practice by stopping your urine flow, as this may lead to bladder problems.

GOING TO THE TOILET

Once your catheter has been removed and you first attempt to pass urine, sit on the toilet, lean forwards and relax.

It is quite normal to feel anxious about opening your bowels after giving birth. However, it is important that you go when you get the urge, to avoid constipation.

When having a bowel movement you may find it more comfortable to place your hand over your abdominal incision for support.

It is important that you sit with your knees above your hips and do not strain. Breathing out will help you to relax.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

It is OK to go slow!

A GOOD LIFTING TECHNIQUE

Make sure that your legs take the strain and not your back.

Bend your knees.

Keep your back straight.

Activate your deeper tummy muscles and your pelvic floor muscles before you lift.

Keep your load close.

Try to avoid lifting heavy weights such as pram/toddler for three months.

GOING HOME IN THE CAR

Pop a pillow between yourself and the seatbelt. This may increase your comfort.

DRIVING

When you start to drive again will depend on your rate of recovery. Can you concentrate?

Can you perform an emergency stop? Check with your insurance company for guidance and to make sure that you are covered.

SEX

When you feel ready. This may not be for 4 – 6 weeks or longer.

You may feel a temporary lack of interest, this is normal.

Remember to use contraception if you are not trying to get pregnant.

SPORT

Avoid strong abdominal exercises, competitive sport, and high impact exercise for three months. If your wound has healed, your pelvic floor is strong, and your six-week post-natal check is clear, then you can gradually return to gentle sporting activities.

If you have any queries, the obstetric physiotherapists will be pleased to give you advice and can be contacted on **01423 553089**

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