

## INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS ABOUT Advice and Exercise following pregnancy

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### ADVICE AND EXERCISES FOLLOWING PREGNANCY

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. Your stomach muscles stretch, as does the vaginal canal, which can lead to weakening of the pelvic floor and, in turn, lead to symptoms of incontinence and prolapse (weakening of the vaginal wall, which can cause it to drop and feel heavy).

For the prevention and management of all of these symptoms, we recommend 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, and 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), develop awareness of your posture, and to form good postural habits.

#### **IMPORTANT INFORMATION - Rest aids recovery!**

- With the exception of your baby, try not to lift anything heavy for six weeks.
- For the first six weeks try to avoid activities that cause strain, such as prolonged standing and housework.
- Avoid movements that involve leading with your head, for example, how you get out of bed: rather than sitting up it is better to roll onto your side first and use your hands to push yourself up.
- 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. This may also be a comfortable position for feeding.



- 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 your baby up, thereby improving your posture.
- Placing pillows under the arm that supports the baby's head can improve your posture and reduce discomfort in your back and shoulders.
- When seated, ensure that your feet are on the floor or rest on a small stool to reduce pressure on your abdomen.

## 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, 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, 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 whilst keeping your feet in contact with the bed.
- Roll onto your side, keeping the knees bent.
- Ease your legs down off the bed.
- Use your hands/elbow to push into the bed to bring yourself up into a seated position.
- Shuffle your bottom to the edge of the bed/chair.
- Engage your pelvic floor muscles.
- Lead with your head, lean forwards, and use your free hand to push up into standing.

### Reverse to get into bed



## EXERCISE

### 'The Rules'

- Listen to your body
- Stop when it hurts
- Stop when 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 (whilst keeping the breath flowing), and then release.
- 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 seconds (whilst 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 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 position. Repeat this 5-10 times and aim to do 3 sets of 10, as able.

## PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES

**When to start:** 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.

### 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 stretch further during delivery. If the muscles are allowed to 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, for example, when 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 a 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 muscles are 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

#### Step 1– Squeeze and Hold

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, practice them whilst doing activities such as walking and bending.

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

**Please do not practice these exercises by stopping the flow of your urine, as this may lead to bladder problems.**

### **GOING TO THE TOILET**

Once your catheter is removed (if you had one), 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.

The optimum position for opening your bowel is to sit with your knees above your hips and not to strain. Breathing out will help you to relax.

When ready to open your bowels you may find it more comfortable to support the perineum. You can do this by wrapping tissue around your hand, or holding a pad between your legs to provide support to the perineum, removing this when the motion is ready to pass.



## IMPORTANT INFORMATION

**It is OK to go slow, let your body heal.**

### **A GOOD LIFTING TECHNIQUE**

- Make sure that your legs take the strain and not your back.
- Bend your knees and 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 a pushchair or toddler for the first 6-12 weeks.

### **GOING HOME IN THE CAR**

Place a pillow between you and the seatbelt. This may increase your comfort.

### **DRIVING**

When you start driving 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 6-12 weeks. If your pelvic floor is strong and your six week post-natal check is clear, then you can gradually return to sporting activities. Please wait 3 months before commencing high impact 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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