

## INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS ABOUT Diastasis Rectus Abdominus (DRA)

### **WHAT IS A DRA?**

Diastasis Rectus Abdominus (DRA) describes the stretching and moving apart of the superficial stomach muscle rectus abdominis, the muscle often referred to as the 'six pack'. When this happens, it stretches the Linea Alba, which is the connective tissue between the right and left sides, as can be seen on the diagram below.

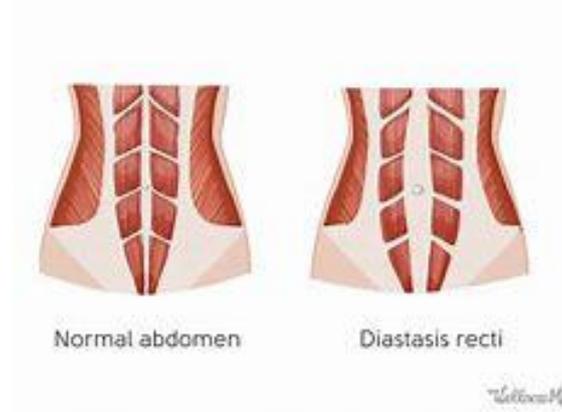


Image Credit

<https://wellnessmama.com/60398/diastasis-recti/>

### **WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?**

The separation usually occurs when the abdominal muscles stretch, for example in pregnancy or with weight gain. When stretched, there is an increase in abdominal pressure, resulting in too much pressure pushing outwards and downwards. The muscles move apart and the Linea Alba, through stretching, becomes thinner. This is visible as doming or a cone shape to the abdomen when using the stomach muscles. Your belly button may be sticking out and you may experience bloating after eating.

Stretching and weakening of the abdominal muscles in pregnancy can lead to problems with back and pelvic pain. It can feel as though your joints are not as stable and can cause abdominal discomfort.

However, DRA is only a problem if the muscles do not go back to normal after having your baby.

### **WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT IT GETTING WORSE AND AID RECOVERY?**

The first step is recognising that you have a DRA. If you your stomach forming a point or a cone shape as you sit up, then it is likely that you have some form of muscle separation.

Wearing a band or support can sometimes be helpful during pregnancy and in the period when the muscles are coming back together after giving birth, (the optimal time for this is in the first eight weeks). Also, being mindful of how you move and doing specific

exercises to manage the symptoms during pregnancy and to optimise the muscles coming back together and improving your core strength after the delivery of your baby.

**WHAT TO AVOID:**

- Do NOT do sit ups, crunches or leg raises.
- Do NOT do any movement that causes the doming to occur, for example movements leading with the head such as when getting out of bed or a chair.
- Avoid twisting movements such as hoovering, or loading and unloading the washing machine.
- Avoid exercising too strongly or incorrectly as this can further increase the muscle separation.

**WHAT TO DO:**

- Seek a referral to the Women's and Men's Health Physiotherapy Team via your GP, midwife or consultant.
- Try to maintain good posture both when sitting and standing.
- In sitting check that your weight is equal through both sitting bones, this can be felt by sitting on your hands.
- When standing, check that you are taking the weight evenly through both feet.
- When getting out of bed, roll onto your side lower your legs out of bed and use your hands to push yourself into an upright position to minimize use of the weakened abdominal muscles.
- Try to ensure that if carrying a load that it is equally distributed between the right and left sides. For example, carrying children on your front rather than resting them on your hip.
- Being mindful how you do any household chores avoiding twisting, lifting and carrying. If these activities cannot be avoided, then engage your pelvic floor muscles and lower stomach muscles to increase abdominal support before lifting or bending.
- Exercises to strengthen your deeper core muscles (see below)

**EXERCISES**

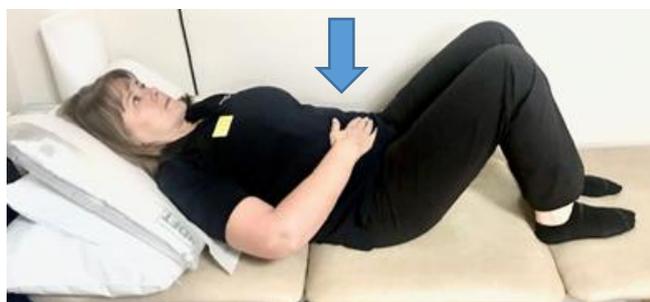
If reading this leaflet after just having given birth then please only start these exercises once your catheter has been removed and you have passed urine more than three times with no problems.

It is recommended that you follow the above advice and aim to do the following exercises three times daily: Pelvic Floor Muscle exercises; Switching on transversus abdominus (deeper tummy muscle): and Pelvic tilting.

**Engaging Your Core - Lower Abdominals****Transverse Abdominus**

This exercise can be done lying down as described below, or sitting on a chair with both feet on the floor.

- Lie down on your back with your knees bent. Use pillows or folded blankets/towels under your head and shoulders to ensure that you are on an incline and not lying flat if you are pregnant. If you are post-natal you can lie flat
- Take a gentle breath in, and, as you breathe out, 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 6-8 times per session.



### Pelvic Tilt

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the bed/floor. Again, use pillows or folded blankets/towels under your head and shoulders to ensure that you are not lying flat if you are pregnant. If you are post-natal you can lie flat.
- Activate your stomach muscles, as in the exercise above, and press the small of your back against the supporting surface and 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 6-8 times per session.



### Four Point Kneeling

- Starting position is on your hands and knees. 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.



## PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES

### The Pelvic floor

The pelvic floor forms a sling of muscles, which attach to the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis and extend to the coccyx (tailbone) at the back. These muscles can become weak due to childbirth, prolapse and post gynaecological surgery. It is important that these muscles regain their strength to carry out their normal functions of preventing incontinence and supporting the pelvic organs (even after having a pelvic floor repair).

### You need to exercise them to:

- Reduce discomfort and swelling.
- Prevent leakage from your bladder or bowel.
- Help prevent prolapse of pelvic organs.

If you have a catheter in place only start your pelvic floor exercises once your catheter is removed and you have passed urine normally x3 times with no problems.

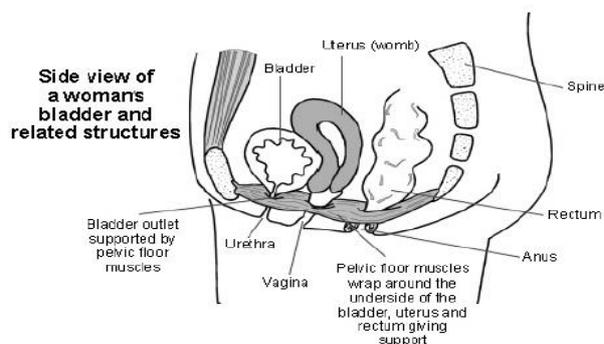


Diagram copy EMIS and PiP 2006, as distributed on [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

## How to exercise your pelvic floor muscles

Pelvic floor muscle exercises should include both long and short squeezes. It is important that you let the muscle relax after each contraction to ensure the muscles become strong and most effective

### Exercise 1

#### Step 1

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

#### Step 2

Gently breathe in to prepare and, as you breathe out, tighten the muscle around your back passage as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind, now slowly tighten the muscles around your front passage as if you are trying to stop yourself passing urine; lift up from back to front and hold.

Aim to hold both back and front pelvic floor muscles tight for 5-10 seconds (without holding your breath). Fully relax for 4 seconds and aim to repeat up to 10 times. Avoid tightening your buttocks and squeezing your legs together. You should feel your lower abdomen draw in slightly.

### Exercise 2

#### To perform the short squeezes

In the same position as before tighten your back and front pelvic floor muscles for a short strong squeeze followed by relaxing the muscles fully.

Aim to build up to 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 progressing from 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 remember to exercise:**

- Try to make the exercises part of your daily routine. Perhaps doing them at the same time as another activity: brushing your teeth / when washing your hands/ after emptying your bladder sat on the toilet.

---

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

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

[Women's and Men's Health Physiotherapy]  
Harrogate District Hospital  
Lancaster Park Road  
Harrogate HG2 7SX  
01423 885959  
Direct line: 01423 553089  
[www.hdft.nhs.uk](http://www.hdft.nhs.uk)

Version: 1

HDFT approval date: March 2021