

**Canterbury**

District Health Board

Te Poari Hauora o Waitaha



PHYSIOTHERAPY NEW ZEALAND



# Looking After Your Body After Childbirth

## Patient Information

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# Looking After Your Body After Childbirth

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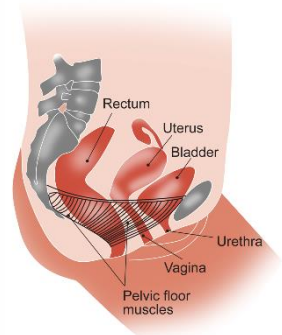
***This booklet contains useful information to assist  
your recovery from pregnancy and childbirth***

# Pelvic floor muscle exercises

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## The Pelvic Floor Muscles (PFM's)

- Lie at the base of the pelvis between the pubic bone at the front and tail bone at the back. The outlets from the bladder (urethra), vagina and back passage (anal canal) pass through the PFM's.
- Give support to the pelvic organs (bladder, uterus, rectum — the lower part of the bowel) to prevent or improve prolapse.
- Help to prevent leakage from the bladder (urine) and back passage (wind or faeces).
- Support your pelvis and lower back.
- Have a role in sexual satisfaction.



**The pelvic floor muscles (along with the nerves and ligaments of the pelvic floor) can be weakened or damaged during pregnancy and childbirth.**

It is important to start exercising your PFM's soon after you have had your baby. You may have bruising and swelling around the pelvic floor area but it is safe to start gently working your PFM's to assist with the healing process.

*If you have a catheter inserted in your bladder, wait until this is removed before you try PFM exercises.*

## How to tighten your PFM's

1. Lie on your side. You may like to have a pillow in front of your tummy and/or between your thighs. You need to feel comfortable.
2. Relax your tummy, bottom and thighs. (When you are relaxed you will see your tummy gently rise and fall as you breathe.) It is important you do this step before you tighten your PFM's.

3. Squeeze and lift up into your vagina as if stopping passing wind or urine. (Imagine drawing your tail bone forwards towards your tummy button.)
4. Try to lift and **hold for a 1-3 seconds then rest for 5 seconds.**

**Repeat 8-10 times, 3 times per day.**

## When your pelvic floor muscles feel more comfortable

- Try and tighten your PFM's when you are sitting. For example;
  - When you are feeding your baby. Make sure your back is supported and you are comfortable.
  - Sitting at the table and leaning forwards keeping your back straight.

## How to progress your PFM exercises

- When you can feel your PFM's lift and then let go, aim to hold for longer and more strongly. Follow this guide:
  - Lift and hold for 3 seconds
  - Relax completely and rest 3-5 seconds
  - Repeat 10 times
  - Do 3 times per day.
- Increase holds by an extra second once you get to 10 repetitions. Eventually you will be able to hold strongly for up to 10 seconds, 10 times, but this can take time (perhaps years in some cases).
- Try to do your exercises when you are standing. Watch your tummy – no sucking in or holding your breath!
- When you try to hold the lift for longer, make sure you can feel the muscles let go in between. If you can't, you are probably trying to hold for too long or the muscles have become fatigued (tired).

The Knack: requires coordination of a quick lift (and squeeze) of the pelvic floor before a cough/sneeze, and let go after the cough/sneeze. Aim to lift your PFM's before you lift your baby/child, before you cough/sneeze, or before any movement that requires effort.

## Extra information

- Aim to do 3 sets of PFM exercises daily for six months. If your muscles are still weak at six months, keep exercising them daily until they are strong. Once you have reached your goal, keep doing PFM exercises at least three times per week.
- It is good to do other exercise to help stimulate your PFM's. For example; walking, low impact exercise classes, swiss-ball exercises and swimming.
- High impact exercise may hinder your PFM's from getting stronger.

For more information:

- [www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au](http://www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au), including app
- [www.continence.org.nz](http://www.continence.org.nz), and click on 'pelvic floor focus'
- Squeezy app NHS [www.squeezyapp.co.uk](http://www.squeezyapp.co.uk)

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If you have ongoing issues with leakage or heaviness we recommend contacting your GP for referral to Women's Health Physiotherapy, CDHB or a private women's health physiotherapist.

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## Bowel care

It is important to avoid constipation following your delivery. The following may help:

1. **Fluids** – aim to drink 1.5 to 2 litres of water every day, or approximately 1 litre extra, if breastfeeding. This includes fluids such as soup, milk and hot drinks but try to make at least half of your drinks water.
2. **Fibre** – try not to skip meals and include plenty of fibre in your diet. You can do this by choosing a high-fibre breakfast cereal or wholegrain bread for breakfast, having 2 or more pieces of fruit a day and having vegetables/salad with dinner and lunch if possible. Also try and choose snacks such as wholegrain crackers, a bran muffin, fruit or popcorn.

3. **Exercise** – daily exercise is good for a healthy bowel.
4. Sitting in a correct position when passing a bowel motion is also important to minimise strain and increase efficiency.

Try to:

1. Have your knees higher than your hips – either raised heels or use a low 15 cm foot stool.
2. Lean forward from your hips. Keep your knees apart and rest your forearms on your knees.
3. Make your waist wide and gently bulge your tummy forward as you work with the urge to go. **DO NOT STRAIN.**



You can support any stitches by holding a wad of toilet paper against your pelvic floor.

When finished – lift your pelvic floor muscles a few times.

## Posture

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### Standing/Walking

Help your abdominal muscles to work more effectively by having a good posture.

Stand tall, imagine a string pulling you up through the top of your head. Keep knees straight, but not locked back.



### Upper and lower back

Back pain is very common postnatally.

To avoid injury:

- Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles, which will also help your deep abdominal muscles to strengthen and will support your back.
- Get regular exercise – walking is free!

- Maintain a good posture at all times, eg. standing, walking, sitting, working, lifting, feeding, etc.

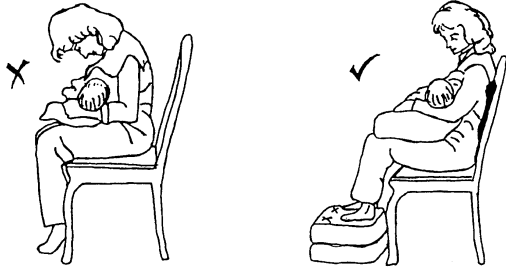
## Sitting

Support your back with a pillow placed in line with your spine.

After each feed practise squeezing your shoulder blades down and back.

Hold for 3-5 seconds.

Repeat 5 times.



## Lifting

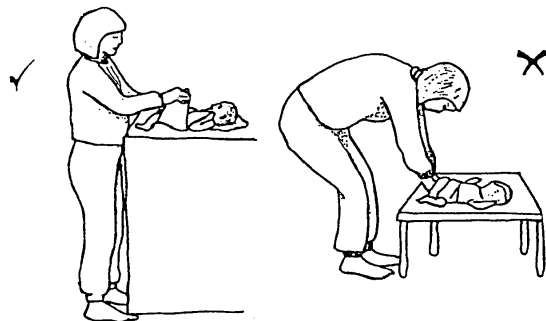
1. Tighten pelvic floor muscles
2. Keep back straight
3. Bend knees
4. Keep whatever you're lifting close to you
5. Breathe out as you lift

**Remember:** do not lift anything heavier than your baby for six weeks after a caesarean section.

## Working

Avoid forward bending as this puts strain on the lower back.

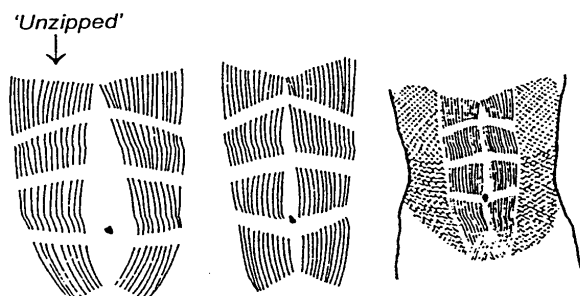
Keep working height at waist level, ie. changing nappies, carrying the washing basket, ironing, bathing baby, pushing pram, vacuuming.



# Separation of abdominal muscles

*(Diastasis Rectus Abdominis)*

During your pregnancy the abdominal muscles may have stretched to allow room for the baby/babies (see diagram below).



- This is normal but sometimes the muscles can separate a lot giving very little support to your back, abdominal contents and pelvic floor muscles.
- Long term, most women have a permanent gap in the muscle of about 1 cm.
- You may benefit from wearing an abdominal support if you have separated muscles, a heavy dragging tummy, or general discomfort in your abdomen or lower back.

**Ask for the hospital physiotherapist to assess you.**

**If you have a separation you need to:**

1. Roll onto your side to get in/out of bed for the first 8 weeks postnatally. (Refer to 'after caesarean section').
2. Avoid sit ups as an abdominal exercise.
3. Wear your abdominal support (Tubigrip) if you have been given one until it is no longer fitting and firm.
4. Begin strengthening your pelvic floor muscles which will help to strengthen your deep abdominal muscles.



# Rest and exercise

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The balance between rest and exercise will gradually change as you recover. Rest whenever your body tells you to. Pain is your body's way of telling you to slow down.

Walking is the easiest way to get active. Gradually increase your exercise by walking. Start off with 1-2 houses down the road. Build up slowly but don't forget the return journey. Walking is your best exercise for the first 6 weeks.

By 6 weeks most women can safely and gradually return to low impact exercise.

Abdominal muscles are best strengthened using 'core stabilising exercises' such as gentle Pilates, swiss ball exercise or specific core programmes.

Avoid full sit-ups, they put a lot of unnecessary pressure on the pelvic floor and abdominal wall.

Finding time to exercise can be a challenge! Make exercise part of your daily/weekly routine. Walk to Plunket, the library, or the shops. Add more specific exercises when you feel able.

Use exercise time as 'your' time. It should be comfortable and stress-free. Switch off, relax and enjoy yourself.

# After caesarean section

*These are simple guidelines for recovery from caesarean section. It will take approximately six weeks for your wound to heal.*

*Follow these guidelines to avoid complications or ongoing pain.*

## Getting out of bed

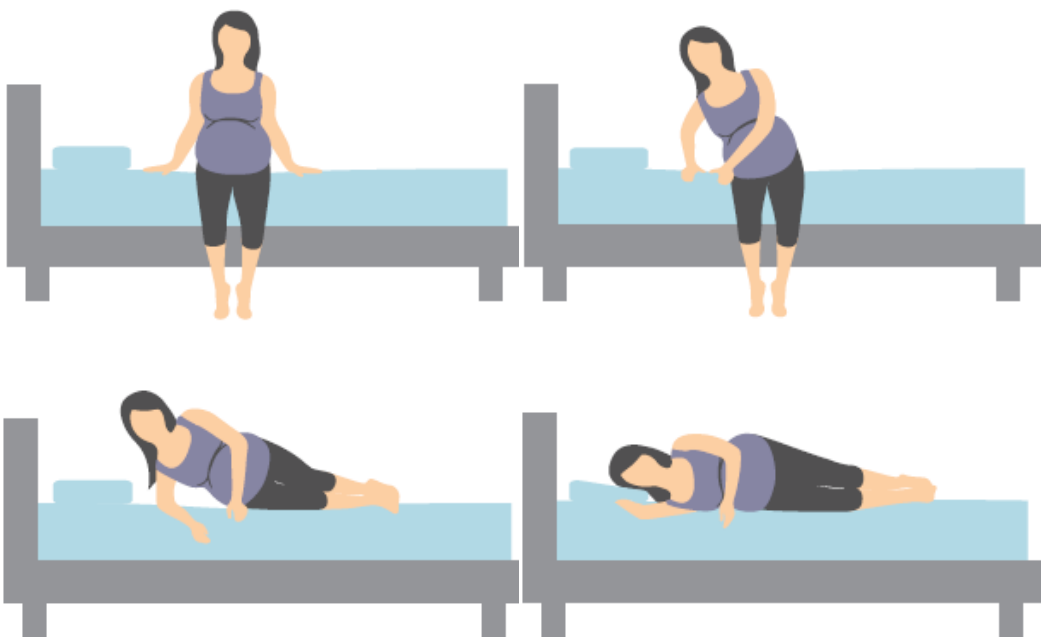
Remember to **ROLL**:

- bend your knees up
- roll onto your side
- put your legs over the side of the bed
- push through your elbow and hand to sit upright

## Getting into bed

Do the reverse of getting out of bed:

- sit on side of bed
- lower onto your elbow sideways
- lift legs up
- **ROLL** back onto the bed



## Wound support

If you need to cough, apply gentle pressure over the wound using a folded towel. If you are lying down, bend your knees up first before applying pressure.

Early mobilisation reduces your risk of complications.

NB: Once you are moving around remember to keep a tall upright posture. This also helps your abdominal muscles work better.

If you have any of the following symptoms, please contact your LMC or GP:

- If you develop a temperature
- If your wound has signs of:
  - increased redness or swelling
  - painful bruising
  - bleeding
  - increased pain
  - discharge or oozing
  - offensive smell
  - hot to touch

## At home

- Do not lift anything heavier than your baby. (Toddlers will love choosing a chair for you to sit on so they can come to you!)
- Ask someone else to do your vacuuming, carry out the washing basket, lift shopping, etc.
- When resuming sexual activity choose comfortable positions and go gently.
- Avoid driving until you can:
  - Brake suddenly in an emergency? (stamp your foot hard on the ground)
  - Belt up comfortably?
  - Back comfortably? (turn your body and look to both sides)
  - Baby and car seat into the car comfortably?

When you can answer yes to all questions, you are ready to drive.

**Do not rush into driving.**

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