

# Exercise after pregnancy – how to get started

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## Information for patients

This information sheet answers some of the questions you may have about recovering after delivering your baby. If you have any other questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the doctors or midwives caring for you.

After giving birth it is natural to want to give your baby all of your attention. Even so, it is important to take some time for yourself. Although regaining fitness, muscle strength and flexibility won't happen immediately there is a lot you can do to help. Regaining fitness will help you feel energised and reduce problems occurring in the future. Regular movement helps to reduce ankle swelling and circulation problems. Try to avoid sitting, lying or standing in the same position for too long.

### **Rest**

It is vital that you take enough time to rest and recover following delivery of your baby. Use of relaxation techniques can help with this. Try to take time to sleep while your baby sleeps.

Lying on your side with a pillow between your legs can be especially comfortable if you have had stitches in your abdomen or perineal area, or have piles.

### **Sitting and feeding**

Sit in a supportive chair with your feet flat and resting on the floor, and place a small pillow or folded towel behind your lower back. This can help to relieve backache. Sit back and relax your shoulders as you feed.

Place a pillow on your lap to help to bring your baby to the level of your breasts and make a more comfortable feeding position.

You can also breastfeed lying on your side, using pillows for comfort.

If you have had a perineal tear or episiotomy you may find sitting directly onto a seat is uncomfortable. Try placing a cushion under each buttock or rolling a towel into the shape of a ring and placing it onto the chair or bed that you want to sit on.

## **Bathing and changing your baby**

Ensure the surface you are changing or bathing your baby at is at waist height. This will help you to avoid bending or straining your back while bathing or changing your baby. Try kneeling down to bath your baby. Alternatively, your partner can pass your baby to you while you are in the bath.

## **Exercise**

Restarting a few simple and safe exercises can help in your return to fitness and help towards reducing the chance of developing postnatal depression. Choose an exercise that is enjoyable to you and helps relieve stress. Taking your baby out for a walk in the pram is a good way for you both to get some exercise and fresh air.

It is usually a good idea to wait until after your six week postnatal check before starting more vigorous and high impact activities.

During pregnancy, your ligaments become more supple and this effect continues for several weeks after birth. Try to reduce the amount of lifting and twisting you do in these first few weeks to avoid the risk of developing or increasing back, hip or pelvic pain. Lower impact activities such as swimming, walking, postnatal yoga and pilates can be good ways to start regaining fitness following your postnatal check.

## **Strengthening your pelvic floor**

Your pelvic floor muscles are at the bottom of your pelvis. They help to support your bladder, bowel and womb. Those organs are affected by pregnancy and delivery, regardless of how your baby was born. It is important to exercise your pelvic floor muscles so they continue to support these organs in later life.

Toning these muscles in the short term can help reduce swelling and soreness and improve bladder and bowel control.

Strengthening the pelvic floor muscles with specific exercises will:

- maintain or improve your bladder and bowel control
- prevent prolapse of pelvic organs
- stabilise the joints of your pelvis and lower back
- increase sexual enjoyment for you and your partner

Pelvic floor exercises are quick and simple. You can do them anywhere as long as you are comfortable. The exercises can be started within the first days following delivery. They will help to reduce leaking of urine when you cough, sneeze, laugh or run as well as controlling the passage of wind and bowel movements. Don't worry if these muscles feel weak at first, this is normal after pregnancy and delivering a baby. Keep practicing and they will improve over time.

### **Pelvic floor exercises**

- Imagine you are trying to stop a poo and a trickle of pee at the same time. Squeeze and lift your pelvic floor muscles, gently drawing them upwards, as if trying to hold a grape or marble inside your vagina.
- Start gently, you may not feel much is happening at first but keep trying. Hold each squeeze for a few seconds, then relax for a few seconds.

- It is important not to hold your breath. You should be able to maintain a conversation while squeezing your pelvic floor.
- Gradually increase the length of time you can hold each 'squeeze' – aim to hold for a few seconds to begin with and increase up to ten seconds, repeat this ten times.
- Next try to do short, fast contractions and quickly release – initially aim to complete ten and build this up over time.
- Try to repeat these exercises three to six times every day. Setting an alarm can remind you to do this.

**Do not:**

- hold your breath
- tighten your tummy muscles excessively
- tighten your buttocks
- squeeze your legs together

**Strengthening your tummy muscles**

Your tummy (abdominal) muscles form a natural corset that supports your back and internal organs. These muscles are stretched in pregnancy to allow your uterus to grow and can be weakened so need to be strengthened. Exercising these muscles will help to strengthen your core which in turn will support your back, pelvic organs and tummy and prevent potential aches and pains.

Start doing these exercises following your six week postnatal check. Find the most comfortable position for you – lie on your back or side with your knees bent or sit in a supportive chair.

**Tummy exercises**

- Relax your tummy muscles, allowing your tummy to sag.
- Place one or both hands on your lower tummy (below your belly button).
- Breathe in through your nose and as you breathe out gently draw in your lower tummy, away from your hands, towards your lower back. Hold for a few seconds, then relax.
- Try not to hold your breath. You should be able to draw in this tummy muscle and breathe.
- Start with a few repetitions (five to ten) each time and gradually increase up to holding for ten seconds.
- Once you have learnt this exercise, practice it standing up.
- Try to get into the habit of using these deep tummy muscles before and during any activity requiring effort, such as lifting or changing your baby.

**Further information**

If you require any further information, or if you have symptoms which are not improving with the advice provided please ask your midwife to refer you to your local women's health physiotherapist who would be happy to invite you for an assessment.

## Useful resources

### Squeezy app

[www.squeezyapp.com](http://www.squeezyapp.com)

### Your Pelvic floor (advice leaflets in multiple languages)

[www.yourpelvicfloor.org/leaflets/](http://www.yourpelvicfloor.org/leaflets/)

A selection of useful videos can be found on the Women's Health Physio King's College Hospital YouTube channel, including:

- [Caring for your pelvic organ prolapse](#)
- [Caring for your perineum after childbirth](#)
- [How to manage an overactive bladder](#)
- [How to manage your bowels and constipation](#)
- [Learn how to do pelvic floor muscle strengthening exercises](#)
- [Stress incontinence](#)
- [Pelvic floor anatomy, physiology and tips on core breathing](#)

## PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

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Email: [kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net)

You can also contact us by using our online form at [www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals](http://www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals)

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

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