



**Countess of
Chester Hospital**
NHS Foundation Trust

Advice and Exercises following Childbirth

Patient Information



Congratulations on the birth of your baby!

The following advice applies to all new mothers whether you have given birth vaginally or by caesarean section. It includes some practical advice to aid your recovery and a safe and effective set of exercises.

Comfort after delivery

Ensure you have sufficient rest to recover. Try to rest whilst your baby sleeps and use pillows for support between knees if lying on your side or under knees if lying on your back. It is important to regain good posture after having a baby as your back is particularly vulnerable in the first few weeks after birth, this includes when you are sitting or standing. Sitting and feeding – always sit well back in your chair and use pillows or folded towels for support behind your back, under your feet and on your lap to help support your baby as needed.

Changing your baby - The surface on which you change your baby's nappy should be at waist height to avoid bending and straining your back. It is also easier to lift your baby at this height.



Bathing - Try to avoid bending forward and straining your back. Try kneeling down if you are washing your baby in the bath, or if you are standing, ensure that the baby bath is at waist height.

Vaginal delivery (including forceps and ventouse)

Perineal care (area of soft tissue between the vagina and the anus)

- It is important to keep this area clean, especially if you have had stitches. Gently rinse from front to back with plain water and dry carefully, especially after going to the toilet.
- Change sanitary pads regularly.
- Try to avoid sitting still for too long.
- Try lying on your side if you are in discomfort.
- Gently exercising the pelvic floor will help with the healing process. Pelvic floor and deep abdominal muscle exercises are safe to do in the first few days as you feel able, see below.
- Ice packs can be applied to the perineum every 1 - 2 hours - only leave the icepacks on for 10 - 15 minutes at a time. This can be useful for the first 24 - 48 hours for swelling and bruising, and as a 'natural' pain reliever at any time in your recovery period.

Caesarean delivery

Take regular pain relief for as long as you require it as instructed by your doctor. Being active is good for you so try to get up and about unless otherwise advised by your doctor. Do not expect too much too soon. Start with short sessions of gentle exercise, such as walking.

Coughing, sneezing or laughing may pull on your tummy. To make it more comfortable try to draw in your tummy muscles, support your wound with a pillow, towel or your hands and apply gentle pressure. It is important to keep your chest clear so try not to hold back a cough.

Get out of bed by rolling onto your side first and lower your legs out of bed whilst pushing up with your arms.

Get into bed by sitting close to the pillow and then lower yourself onto your side bringing your legs up onto the bed.



Bladder care

- Make sure you are passing urine regularly.
- You may find you are less aware of the need to empty your bladder. If so, it is still important to go to the toilet approximately every 2-3 hours.
- Make sure you drink at least 2 litres of water every day, especially if you are breastfeeding, to avoid becoming dehydrated.
- If you have any difficulty passing urine, tell your midwife, health visitor or GP.

Bowel care

- Try to avoid becoming constipated as it can cause a strain on the pelvic floor muscles and stitches.
- A healthy diet, including fruit and plenty fluids, will help you return to a regular bowel habit.
- You may be prescribed medication for constipation such as Lactulose or Fibogel.
- When sitting on the toilet to open your bowels try to lean forward with your forearms on your knees and feet on a low stool if possible, or rise up onto your toes to have your knees higher than your hips.

Every day activities

It is important to take time to return to your normal everyday activities.

- Gradually build up your level of activity and rest between activities.
- Accept help.
- Do not lift anything heavier than your baby for 6 weeks and avoid lifting anything very heavy for 3 months.
- Help toddlers to climb (rather than lifting them) or let other people lift them for you.
- Tighten your pelvic floor and low tummy muscles before lifting your baby.
- Before returning to high impact exercise (e.g. jogging, aerobics) you should be able to hold your pelvic floor contraction for 10 seconds.
- Wait until after your 6 week check before returning to swimming.

Driving

Before returning to driving you must be confident that you can do an emergency stop. If you have had a caesarean section it normally takes about 6 weeks before you can do this comfortably and safely. Check with your insurance company that you are covered to drive.

Exercises

You should practice these hourly throughout the day for the first 3 days and then continue three times a day and do more as you feel able. You will not disturb your wound or stitches/staples as they will be very secure.

Deep Breathing Exercises

Take a slow deep breath in through your nose, hold for 2 seconds, and then breathe out through your mouth, repeat this 3 times. This helps to keep your chest clear.

Ensure that you cough strongly and effectively to clear any excess secretions. Place a pillow or towel over your tummy to support your wound.

Circulation

Simple leg exercises should be performed until you are comfortably up and about to increase circulation and reduce the risk of blood clots.

- If your ankles are swollen put your feet up with your knees supported.

- Avoid sitting with your legs or ankle crossed as this may restrict blood flow.
- Avoid standing still for long periods.
- In sitting or lying, bend and stretch your ankles firmly and quickly. Repeat 10 times.



- In sitting with your legs out straight or lying, brace the backs of your knees into the mattress if lying down. Repeat 10 times.
- In sitting, straighten your knees lifting your foot off the floor. Repeat 10 times.
- Clench your buttocks. Repeat 10 times.

Pelvic Floor Exercises

In a lying or sitting position, tighten the muscles around your anus (back passage) and draw them up as if trying to stop yourself passing wind. At the same time tighten the muscles around the vagina and also around your front passage as well drawing them up as if trying to stop passing urine. At first you may only manage a flicker of a squeeze but continue to practice and build



up strength and endurance in the muscle by repeating little and often throughout the day doing 2 or 3 squeezes each time. As you lift and squeeze, try to keep your legs, buttocks and tummy muscles relaxed. Gradually increase the hold time to 10 seconds over the course of approximately 12 weeks. As you progress, try doing some of these exercises in a standing position. Aim to do a total of 30 contractions spread out over the course of the day. It is important to use your pelvic floor whenever you lift your baby, laugh, change position, e.g. standing up/sitting down, any sudden movement, cough or sneeze. This will help control any stress incontinence and help to support your pelvic organs.

Deep abdominal muscle exercises

Your abdominal muscles form a natural corset that supports your back and stabilises your pelvis. This helps prevent back and pelvic pain. By exercising your deep abdominal muscles it will help to close the gap between the outermost muscles more quickly, help you regain your body shape and prevent or relieve backache.

Place one or both hands on your lower abdomen below your tummy button, breathe in through your nose and as you breathe out draw in your lower abdomen, away from your hands, towards your lower back, then relax.



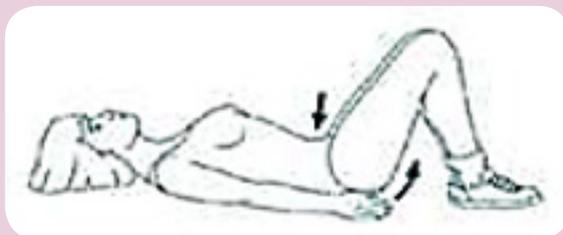
Make sure that your ribcage and shoulders do not lift. Do not suck in your tummy or bear down (push down) while you do this.

As this exercise gets easier to do you will be able to breath or talk at the same time. Once you have mastered this "core exercise" you can practise it when standing. To progress further hold the contraction for 3 seconds while continuing to breath or talk. Use this muscle throughout the day particularly when doing any activity requiring effort e.g. getting out of bed, standing up from sitting, lifting or changing your baby.

Pelvic tilt

Lie on your back with your head on a pillow and your knees bent up with your feet flat on the floor.

Start by tightening your deep abdominal muscles as described above and flatten your lower back into the floor/bed which will tilt your pelvis, but do not lift yourself off the floor. Breathe normally and hold this position for 3 seconds then release gently. Repeat this exercise up to 10 times, 3 times per day. The pelvic tilt exercise can be particularly helpful for maintaining abdominal muscle strength, correcting posture and easing back pain.



Day 7 onwards: Lie on your back with your knees bent up and your feet flat on the bed or floor at hip distance apart. Use pelvic rocking to ensure your waist is neither too flat nor arched away from the surface you are lying on. Tighten your pelvic floor muscle then do the following exercises.

- Bend alternate knees up to your tummy and down.



- Let one knee roll a small way out to the side and back. Ensure your back and pelvis stay still and then repeat with the other knee.



- Slide one heel a small way down the bed or floor – bring it back up. Repeat with the other heel. Ensure your back and pelvis stays still.



To check your tummy muscles lie on your back with your knees bent. Place your fingertips together just above your belly button. Tuck your chin in towards your chest and lift your head and shoulders up off the floor. You should feel two vertical ridges (the edges of your muscles) pressing in against your fingers. See how many fingers you can fit in between these muscles. If the gap between your tummy muscles is less than two fingers wide, continue with all of the exercises in this leaflet. If the gap is larger than two fingers wide, avoid making your stomach bulge with activities such as lifting and getting in and out of bed, and ask your health visitor or GP for a referral to see a Women's Health physio or attend a Post Natal exercise class.

From 6 weeks, if you have no bulging when you lift your head from a lying position, you can return to any exercise or sport that you were doing before you became pregnant. Start as a beginner again and train up. It will not take as long as before, but remember to listen to your body and go at your own pace.

**Pelvic, obstetrics and gynaecological physiotherapy:
01244 365176**

If you require a special edition of this leaflet

This leaflet is available in large print, Braille, on compact disk and in other languages on request. Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on:

Telephone: **01244 366066**

or email: **cochpals@nhs.net**

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Si vous voulez cette brochure en français, contactez le bureau des rendez-vous ou demandez à un membre du personnel.

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