Caring for your body in pregnancy

This leaflet has been written to help you adjust to your changing shape during pregnancy. The leaflet includes advice on exercising, specific exercises and advice on how to reduce stress on your back and pelvis. If you are unsure whether an activity is suitable for you, speak to your midwife or physiotherapist.

Exercise and pregnancy

Mild to moderate exercise is good for you and your developing baby. Exercise will help maintain your fitness and help your circulation. Activities such as brisk walking, swimming, aqua natal classes, Pilates/yoga and gym ball exercises are all excellent during pregnancy.

During pregnancy your body is at greater risk of sprains and strains due to the weight of the baby and the effect of the hormones on your ligaments and muscles, resulting in less stable joints.

When exercising, remember:

- Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Work within your own limits to avoid getting too hot or breathless. (Remember the intensity of exercise should be at a level that allows you to continue to carry out a conversation while exercising).
- Listen to your body – stop exercising if you are uncomfortable, in pain, tired or feeling unwell.
- Avoid or limit high impact activities, such as running and jumping, when pregnant.
- Avoid contact sports.
- Look for exercise classes that are designed for pregnant women.
- Be cautious when using machines at the gym. Ask for help to check you are using equipment correctly.

Circulation and muscle cramps

If your feet and ankles are swollen or you are suffering from leg cramps, help your circulation by:

- Not crossing your legs.
- Circling your feet, especially before going to bed.
- Stretching the calf by having your legs out straight and pulling your feet and ankle towards you and holding for a count of five.
- Elevating your legs in a supported position.
- Regular short walks.
- If your feet/ankles continue to be swollen and if you are also swollen elsewhere e.g. your hands or face, speak to your midwife or doctor.

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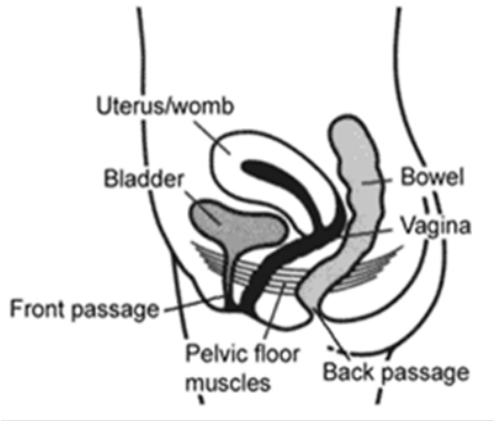
The weight of the baby will affect your posture. As the baby grows, your centre of gravity will change. An awareness of your posture is important to minimise resultant aches and pains. Here are a few tips to reduce the risk of strain and discomfort to your back and pelvis:

- Always stand and walk tall with your shoulders relaxed.
- Make sure your back is supported when you are sitting and your feet are flat on the ground. You may find a rolled-up towel or small pillow in the lower curve of your spine gives you extra support.
- Ensure the surface you are working at is the right height for you, both at work and at home.
- When shopping or carrying bags, ensure you carry the weight evenly in each hand.
- Avoid carrying your toddler on one hip, try and alternate.
- Avoid lifting heavy objects. When you have to lift, bend your knees not your back, and keep the object close to you.
- When getting in and out of bed, roll onto your side, keeping knees together, and as you take your legs of the bed push yourself into sitting. Avoid sitting up using your abdominal/tummy muscles.
- Get dressed seated instead of standing on one leg, to minimise movement of the pelvic bones.
- Avoid twisting movements, especially when lifting.

Pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor muscles are sling-like muscles that lie at the base of the pelvis, supporting the internal organs, including the womb and your baby. They help you to control your bladder and bowel, as well as enhancing sexual intercourse. Exercising these muscles now will help increase your awareness of how they work. This is important to help you recover from the pregnancy and delivery when these muscles are weakened. Weakness in these muscles can result in leaking of urine/faeces (wee/poo) during activities of daily life. To try and prevent this, you should do pelvic floor exercises daily.



Exercise 1: ‘Slow ones’ (these also help with urge incontinence and urgency)

- You can begin exercising your pelvic floor lying down with knees bent, or sitting comfortably.
- Tighten your back passage as if trying to hold in diarrhoea and then bring this contraction round to the front as if trying to hold in a tampon, or stop urine.
- Do not use your tummy or bottom cheek muscles when doing this exercise. You should not see any external movement.
- Aim to hold this contraction for 3-5 seconds. Build up strength within your pelvic floor until you can hold for 10 seconds. Always remain in control of the contraction and relaxation – do not let the contraction “melt away”.
- Keep breathing throughout and then relax your pelvic floor for at least 5 seconds in between each contraction.

Exercise 2: 'Quick ones' (these can also help with stress incontinence)

- You should begin exercising your pelvic floor lying down with knees bent.
- Tighten the muscles as above.
- Hold for 1 second and relax for 3 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

Use these muscles to support you by tightening them before you cough, sneeze, lift baby, or stand from sitting

Both the slow and fast exercises should be done together, in one session, minimum 3 times per day. **Repeat each exercise (slow and fast) 10 times, 3-4 times a day. This should become a habit for life, like cleaning your teeth.**

Abdominal muscles

As your baby grows, your abdominals will be stretched and weakened. Your abdominals act as a corset supporting your back and your baby. It is important to maintain the strength in these muscles to provide support for your back.

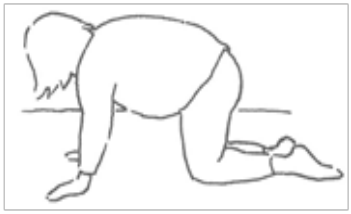
All exercises should be repeated up to 10 times with a short rest between each exercise, 3 times a day.

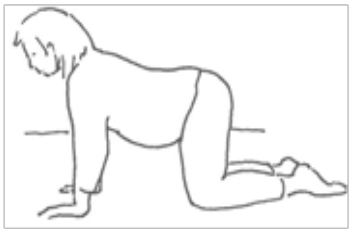
Exercise 3 (Core exercise)

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet resting on the bed. Take a breath in, and then as you breathe out gently draw your lower abdomen in towards your spine.
- Hold this while continuing to breathe, and then relax.
- Increase the hold until you can hold for the count of 10 and repeat 10 times;
- Always draw these muscles in to support you when you are doing any abdominal exercises and in any activity involving your back e.g. lifting anything, including your baby; rising from sitting; getting out of bed; and bending over. This is another good habit for life.

Exercise 4 (Pelvic tilting)

- Start lying down with knees bent and feet resting on the bed, draw in your lower abdomen, as in exercise 1. (You can also do this exercise in standing, against a door or on hands and knees.)
- At the same time tuck your tailbone under, flattening the curve of your lower back.
- Keep breathing while holding this position for a few moments and then relax.
- This exercise can be done at any time and is also very good for easing an aching back.





Please ring **0118 322 7811 / 7812** if you need to speak to a pelvic health and maternity physiotherapist.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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