

**EXERCISES BEFORE  
and  
AFTER BIRTH**

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**Better Health Good Health Care**

# Exercises before and after birth

## Introduction

It is important for you to exercise both during your pregnancy and after you have had your baby. To help you learn to practise exercises correctly, you can obtain advice from physiotherapists with special skills and training in managing the physical problems of pregnancy and the postnatal period. You can find your nearest Women's Health Physiotherapist by contacting the NSW Branch of the Australian Physiotherapy Association. If you need help to make this call, telephone the Translating and Interpreting Service on 131450 or ask for a Health Care Interpreter at the hospital.

The following exercises will help strengthen and maintain muscles. They are also useful in relieving and preventing back pain.

It is possible to do these exercises all the way through your pregnancy and the postnatal period, as long as you feel comfortable. Be aware of your breathing patterns during these exercises. Don't hold your breath – breathe normally. The number of repetitions you do of each exercise will depend very much on how you are feeling. It is better to do fewer exercises properly and with total awareness than to aim for a high number of exercises. Eight to twelve repetitions are recommended if you are feeling comfortable. If you experience any pain or strain, especially from your back, abdomen or pelvic regions, either modify the exercise or avoid it altogether.



Picture A: standing

## Abdominal exercises (tummy tucking)

You can do these exercises (A) standing or (B) on hands and knees.

Do these exercises frequently during the day, for example, while doing housework or whilst bathing the baby. Try tummy tucking whenever you move, and this will help support your back.

These exercises will maintain or improve abdominal muscle tone.

**REMEMBER: DO NOT HOLD YOUR BREATH WHILE DOING THE EXERCISES**

- ✓ Stand with feet apart and knees slightly bent. (See picture A)
- ✓ Put your fingers on the widest part of your stomach, below your navel.
- ✓ Pull your tummy in away from your fingers - hold for a few seconds and then let go.

On all fours - hands and knees



Picture B: on all fours

**REMEMBER: DO NOT MOVE YOUR PELVIS OR BACK IN ANY WAY WHEN YOU DO THIS EXERCISE**

- ✓ Put your hands on the floor (keep them shoulder distance apart), with your knees bent under your hips. (See picture B)
- ✓ Pull your tummy in without holding your breath - hold for a few seconds and then let go.
- ✓ To progress this exercise on hands and knees, tummy tuck, then, holding your body as still as possible, lift one arm up level with your shoulder.
- ✓ Hold for a few seconds and then lower your arm.
- ✓ Repeat with the other arm.

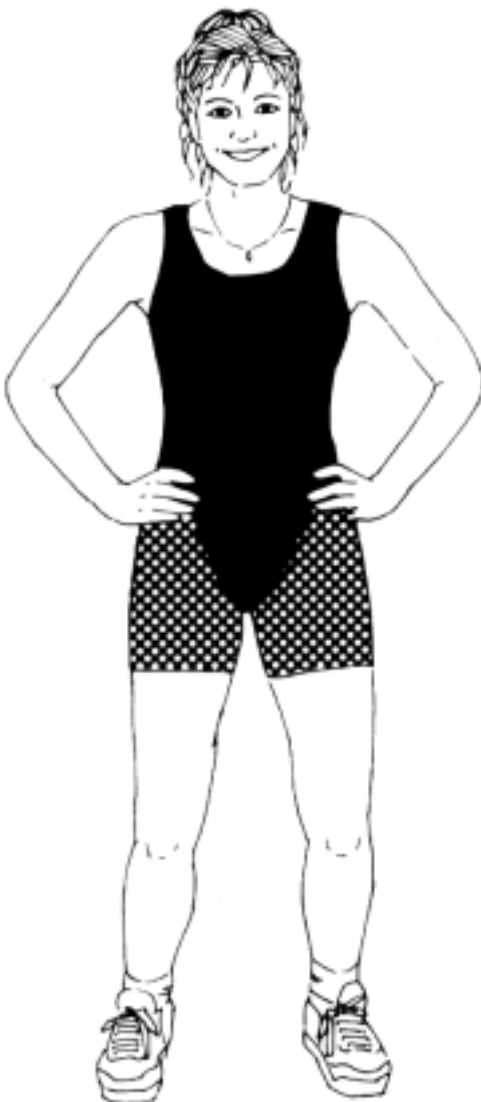
**Back Stretches:** To help relieve back ache and maintain mobility.

- ✓ Starting position: kneel on all fours (see Picture C)
- ✓ Tuck in your tummy and round your back upwards, with tail bone tucked in and head gently lowered between the arms.
- ✓ Hold for a few seconds, then relax.



Picture C: back stretch

These exercises will help keep mobility in your spine



### Pelvic Rotation

- ✓ Starting position: stand with your feet comfortably apart.
- ✓ Bend your knees slightly. Place your hands on your hips. (See picture D)
- ✓ Rotate your pelvis clockwise (as in belly dancing).
- ✓ Repeat in an anti-clockwise direction.

**Pelvic tilting:** also assists in relieving back ache

- ✓ Starting position: stand with your feet comfortably apart.
- ✓ Bend your knees slightly.
- ✓ Place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your lower back.
- ✓ Imagine your pelvis is a basin and tip it slowly backwards and forwards.
- ✓ Repeat this exercise on all fours (on hands and knees).

Picture D: pelvic rotation

## Pelvic floor exercises

It is very important for you to exercise and strengthen the pelvic floor muscles during your pregnancy, and to continue these exercises after the birth of your baby. The pelvic floor muscles, which are around your vagina and urethra (front passage) and your anus (back passage) help to support the pelvic organs. These muscles form a sling running from the pubic bone at the front, to the tailbone at the back. If these muscles are weak, you may lose control of your bladder and bowel, experience the sensation of "something coming down" into the vagina, or you may suffer from decreased sexual sensation. Exercises help to keep the muscles strong.

### How to do exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles

- ✓ Tighten and pull up the muscles all at once. This should feel like an upward and inward movement in the vagina and anus area.
- ✓ Hold for as long as comfortable – before your baby is born, you may be able to hold the muscles tight for up to 10 seconds. After you have had your baby, you may find that in the first few days, you may only be able to hold the muscles tight for 2 – 3 seconds.
- ✓ Relax the muscles. Then tighten, pull up and hold. Count how many times you can do this. Then each time you do your exercises, try to do this same number of pelvic floor exercises in a row.
- ✓ Try to do your exercises about 6 times a day while your muscles are quite weak and tire easily.
- ✓ After a week or two, see if you can hold for a greater number of seconds than you started with, and see if you can do more in a row before the muscles get tired.
- ✓ Aim to do 8 – 12 repetitions, holding each one for 6 – 10 seconds, three times a day as a maintenance programme.
- ✓ Do these exercises while you are standing, sitting and lying. Don't hold your breath.
- ✓ Try to make these exercises a part of your daily routine, do them after urinating, while standing in queues, in the shower, while cleaning your teeth, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and when you feed the baby.
- ✓ Remember to contract your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze, lift your baby or toddler, the washing or shopping, and when you are trying to put off going to the toilet.
- ✓ As your muscles improve you'll notice that you can run for the bus, cough and sneeze without leaking urine and that you can "hang on" longer when you are not near a toilet.
- ✓ If you are experiencing any problems - don't put up with them!!!  
The Australian Physiotherapy Association (02) 8748 1555 or the Continence Foundation of Australia (02) 9840 4165 can put you in touch with someone who is experienced in pelvic floor problems.

## Good bladder habits

- ✓ You need to drink at least 2 litres of fluid a day, and while you are breastfeeding, increase this to at least 2.5 litres a day.
- ✓ Do not go to the toilet "just in case".
- ✓ Be careful of how much caffeine you are drinking as caffeine can irritate the bladder.

Remember that chocolate, tea, coffee and cola drinks contains caffeine!

**Good bowel habits:** Straining to empty your bowels can lead to weakness and damage to the pelvic floor muscles, so:

- ✓ Avoid constipation and straining when you empty your bowels.
- ✓ Always empty your bowels when you get the urge to do so.
- ✓ Maintain a good fluid intake, as above.
- ✓ Eat lots of fibre – fruit, vegetables at every meal, wholemeal bread.
- ✓ Use a foot stool so your knees are higher than your hips when you open your bowels.
- ✓ Don't push – instead bulge your belly forwards like a basket ball, this allows your pelvic floor to let go.

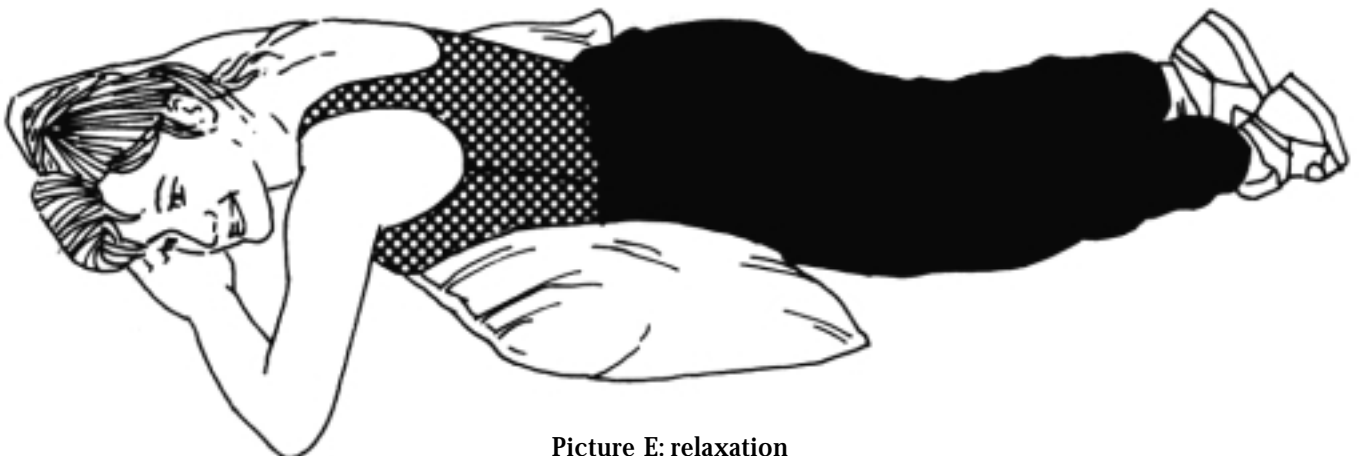
It is important that the muscles of the pelvic floor relax so that you can open your bowels correctly.

## Rest and relaxation

It is very important to get rest during your pregnancy and in the early postnatal time.

After the birth, a good position in which to rest, is lying face down with pillows under your hips.

This is especially helpful for your back and pelvic floor. (See picture E)



Picture E: relaxation

## Other exercise

Other safe exercises include walking and swimming. (See picture F)

Aim to exercise 3 times a week for 20-30 minutes. Make sure you can talk comfortably while exercising – if not, slow down a little. If you have just had your baby, wait until the vaginal discharge has finished before swimming.

It is advisable to wear supportive, comfortable flat shoes eg. joggers. Begin walking on flat surfaces, increasing time and distance as you progress.

Sport or other exercise can usually be started 6-8 weeks after a vaginal birth, or 2-3 months after a caesarean birth. Start gently and progress gradually at your own pace within your limits of comfort and fatigue. Avoid exercise that causes pain or strain in muscles or joints. Low impact aerobics, (no jumping), aqua-aerobics (exercise in the water) or a specially designed programme in postnatal classes would be best.

# *Good luck!*

And remember –  
Exercise, take it regularly  
not seriously.

- This multilingual resource was developed by NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service in collaboration with the NSW Continence and Women's Health Physiotherapy Group, a special interest group of the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA)
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Picture F: walking