

Give me strength:
pre- and post-
natal exercises

Exercises for pregnancy and afterwards

As well as keeping fit with walking, swimming or other activities, you need to take special care of the muscles in your tummy, back and pelvic floor. These muscles are under more stress than usual in pregnancy and are easily weakened. Exercise will help to:

- keep muscles strong
- prevent and relieve back pain (a common problem in pregnancy)
- control your bladder
- get you back into shape after your baby is born.

Do these exercises throughout your pregnancy, as long as you feel comfortable. You can start doing them again as soon as day two after a vaginal birth. If you've had a caesarean section operation, wait until day five. Do the tummy and back exercises for at least six weeks after the birth – and keep up the pelvic floor exercises for the rest of your life.

Remember:

- breathe normally while you do them (don't hold your breath)
- if you have any pain or discomfort, especially in your back, tummy or pelvic area, stop the exercise. Ask a physiotherapist for advice.

Mind your back

Strong abdominal muscles do more than flatten your tummy – they also help to protect your back. Avoid strong abdominal exercises until six weeks after the baby is born – gentle exercises are OK.

Gentle abdominal exercises will help keep your spine flexible.

Pelvic rotation

- Stand with your feet comfortably apart.
- Bend your knees slightly.
- Put your hands on your hips.
- Rotate your pelvis clockwise (as if you're belly dancing).
- Now rotate your pelvis anti-clockwise.
- Repeat 5-10 times.

Pelvic tilt (helps relieve back pain, too)

- Stand with your feet comfortably apart.
- Bend your knees slightly.
- Place one hand on your tummy and the other on your lower back.
- Imagine your pelvis is a basin or bowl and tip it slowly backwards and forwards.
- Repeat 5-10 times.
- If it's comfortable, repeat this exercise on your hands and knees.

Pelvic tilt on your hands and knees

- Keep your hands on the floor, and tip your pelvis backwards and forwards.
- This position is particularly good if you have backache.
- Repeat 5-10 times.

If you want to make this exercise a little harder:

- Hold your body as still as possible.
- Lift one arm up level with your shoulder.
- Lift the opposite leg at the same time.
- Hold for a few seconds, then lower your arm and leg.
- Relax the tummy muscles.
- Repeat with the other arm and leg.
- Repeat 5-10 times on each side.

Check your tummy muscles after the baby is born

During pregnancy, it's normal for tummy muscles to separate. It's easy to check:

- lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor
- press the fingers of one hand gently into the area around your navel
- breathe out and raise your head and shoulders a little
- if there is a separation, you'll feel a 'gap' and the two separate edges of the muscle.

Keeping up the exercises (either standing up or on all fours) will help to close the gap after your baby is born (though sometimes the gap may not close completely).

If the gap is wider than two fingers, you may have lower back pain. As well as keeping up your exercises, wearing an abdominal support may help. Ask a midwife or physiotherapist for advice.



Stretches to ease back aches and pains

For low backache:

- Sit with your bottom on your heels with your knees apart.
- Lean forward towards the floor, resting your elbows on the ground in front of you.
- Slowly stretch your arms forward.
- Hold for few seconds.

For middle back:

- Go down on your hands and knees.
- Draw in lower tummy.
- Tuck your tail under.
- Hold for a few seconds.
- Gently lower the back down as far as feels comfortable.

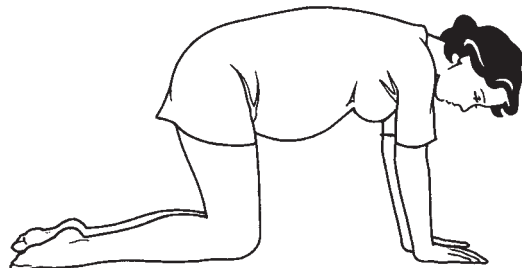
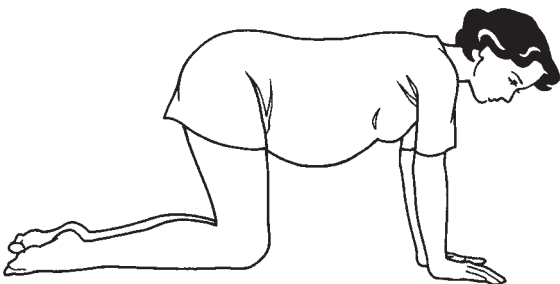
For pain in shoulder blades and upper back:

- Sit on a firm chair.
- Brace your tummy muscles.
- Interlock your fingers and lift your arms overhead.
- Straighten your elbows and turn your palms upwards.
- Hold for few seconds.

Other ways to care for your back in pregnancy and after the birth

- Avoid standing on one leg or heavy lifting.
- Work at benches or tables that are at waist height.
- Keep nappy buckets and washing baskets at waist height.
- Carry the baby in a safe baby carrier or put them in a pram rather than carrying them in a capsule. Several different types of wearable baby carriers are available. Fabric wrap, pouch or bag slings and framed carriers are some examples. Parents and carers should take care when using slings and pouches to carry babies. Babies are at risk of suffocation if placed incorrectly in a sling. For important information on safely using baby carriers go to <https://www.productsafety.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/971550>
- Kneel down rather than bending to clean the bath or make beds.
- Go for a swim (after birthing, wait until your bleeding has stopped before you start swimming again).
- If walking causes pain in one buttock; you have pain in the pubic, groin or lower back area; or if you notice the pain the day after a walk, shorten your stride, avoid stairs, and avoid any activity (e.g. vacuuming) where you might put more weight on one leg.
- If back pain is severe or persistent, see a doctor who may refer you to a physiotherapist.

Pelvic tilt



Caring for your pelvic floor

Being pregnant and having a baby means you're almost three times more likely to leak urine and wet yourself than women who haven't had a baby. One in three women who have had a baby wet themselves...but you don't have to be one of them.

What causes it?

Being pregnant and giving birth stretches the muscles of your pelvic floor – the muscles that keep your bladder shut. Weakened muscles can't stop your bladder from leaking. This leaking happens mostly when you cough, sneeze, lift or exercise. You may also find that you can't wait when you want to pass urine.

Will it go away by itself?

No. You'll need to help your pelvic floor muscles get strong again. If you don't strengthen the muscles after each baby, you're likely to wet yourself more often when you reach middle age. Pelvic floor muscles tend to weaken with age. Menopause can make incontinence worse.

How can I prevent this happening to me?

- Always squeeze and hold your pelvic floor muscles before you sneeze, cough or lift.
- Don't go to the toilet "just in case" – this trains your bladder to want to empty more often.
- Empty your bladder completely when you go to the toilet.
- Avoid constipation by drinking plenty of fluids (preferably water) and fibre rich foods.
- When sitting on the toilet, lean forward. Your knees should be slightly higher than your hips (you could use a small stool or step to rest your feet on). Rest your elbows on your knees or thighs so that your back is straight. Gently bulge your abdomen. Relax your pelvic floor and avoid pushing.

Do pelvic floor squeezes every day. Here's how:

- Squeeze, lift and hold your pelvic floor upwards and forwards towards your pubic bone tightening around the anus, vagina and urethra.
- Start by holding for 3 seconds or more (build up to 10 seconds) and rest for the equal length of hold time.
- Repeat the squeezes 8-12 times (one set).
- Keep breathing during the squeezes.
- Congratulations – you've done one set. Try to do three sets every day, gradually holding your squeeze for longer. As your pelvic muscles get stronger, you can aim to hold for longer.

You can start the pelvic floor exercises lying on your back or side and you may practise this sitting and then standing when it gets easier for you.

Do these squeezes three times a day for the rest of your life.

Want to know more about how you can strengthen your pelvic floor and keep your abdominals and back in good shape?

For more information on exercise in pregnancy Sports Medicine Australia provide a brochure at http://sma.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/SMA_AWiS_Pregnancy_-_Exercise.pdf. Information is also available from the NSW Office of Sport visit http://www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/active/tips_pregnancy.asp

The National Continence Management Strategy has a series of brochures about continence including publications specifically for women who are pregnant and women who have had a baby. They have also produced factsheets with exercises to help you strengthen your pelvic floor. Visit www.bladderbowel.gov.au where you'll find links to these publications and also to versions of the brochures in many community languages.

For more advice about exercises that will help you through pregnancy and becoming a parent, see a hospital physiotherapist. To contact a women's health physiotherapist in your area, call the NSW Branch of the Australian Physiotherapy Association on (02) 8748 1555.



Where can I get help?

The Continence Foundation of Australia provides a free National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66 or visit <http://www.continence.org.au/> for more information about bladder and bowel health.

How can I remember to do my pelvic floor squeezes?

It's easier to remember if you do them at the same time as you do something else. Pick something from this list. Each time you do it, do a set of squeezes too.

- After going to the toilet.
- Washing your hands.
- Having a drink.
- Feeding the baby.
- Standing in line at the supermarket checkout.

Weaker pelvic floor muscles can make you break wind more

Just in case you need another reason to get serious about strengthening your pelvic floor muscles – these muscles also help close off the back passage (anus). Many women find that following the birth of their baby they have less control, and find it harder to control wind, or to hold when they need to open their bowel. If you do experience problems speak to your midwife or doctor as early treatment can be simple yet effective in improving muscle tone.