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Introduction

During pregnancy and in the first 6 months following the birth of your baby, there are a lot of changes to your body and it is important you give your body extra care. Pregnancy hormones soften your ligaments, stomach and pelvic floor muscles. It is easy to injure yourself at this time and especially if your joints are not well supported.

This booklet provides you with information to help your recovery post birth and to stay comfortable and healthy. It will help you to care for your bowel, bladder, pelvic floor muscles and back and also return to exercise safely.

If you have any questions, require further advice or would like to see a physiotherapist post birth, please contact Osborne Park Hospital on 9346 8000 and ask to speak with the Physiotherapy Department.
Osborne Park Hospital offers a mum and baby exercise class postnatally. Exercise classes are run by a physiotherapist who is able to guide you through safe exercise post birth and modify exercises to suit your body. This is a great way to start exercising again – we give you safe exercises for your body and offer you a fun, supportive environment where you can socialise with other mums.
Who:
Postnatal women who delivered their baby at Osborne Park Hospital or King Edward Memorial Hospital from 6 weeks to 6 months post birth. Free for Medicare eligible patients.

When:
Every Friday (except public holidays) 1:30pm-2:30pm and 2:45pm-3:45pm. Classes run all year and close mid-December through to mid-January (dates will be given by your physiotherapist closer to the time).

Where:
Osborne Park Hospital ‘F’ Block, next to the Physiotherapy Department. Classes will run in the Activities Room (same location as the Healthy Pregnancy Exercise class). Parking is available outside the ‘F’ Block entrance.

Bring:
Purple baby book, full water bottle, supportive enclosed footwear (sneakers).
Please come to your first class 15 minutes early so that the Physiotherapist can complete your initial assessment. No bookings are required.

For further details please contact Osborne Park Hospital on 9346 8000 and ask to speak with the Physiotherapy Department.
Please have your purple baby book with you when you ring.
When to see a Women’s Health Physiotherapist?

Some women may need additional physiotherapy care post birth. Please contact the Women’s Health physiotherapists at Osborne Park Hospital if you experience any of the conditions listed below:

- Musculoskeletal pain: neck, back, pelvis, tailbone, wrist.
- Difficultly doing pelvic floor exercises.
- Painful scar tissue (caesarean, episiotomy, tear).
- Blocked milk ducts, mastitis, engorged breasts.
- Cracked nipples.
- Bladder or bowel problems:
  - Accidentally losing control of your bowel or bladder
  - Urgency to pass urine or stool – needing to go to the toilet in a hurry and not making it there in time
  - Needing to go to the toilet every hour or more
  - Pain when passing urine or stool
  - Haemorrhoids
  - Constipation
- Pain with sexual intercourse.
- Pain in the pelvic area.
- Separated or weak abdominal muscle.
- Prolapse – this may be felt as a bulge in the vagina or feelings of heaviness, pulling, discomfort or dragging in the vagina.

If you have any of the above problems or would like your pelvic floor muscles or abdominal muscles checked then please contact Osborne Park Hospital on 9346 8000 and ask to speak with the Physiotherapy Department to book an appointment. You do not need a referral in the first 6 weeks post birth if you delivered at Osborne Park Hospital.
Recovery after Birth

Here are some simple tips that you can do to help your body recover better.

Getting in and out of bed:

- Roll onto your side first. This reduces the strain on your stomach after a caesarean or vaginal delivery. This protects your pelvic floor muscles and abdominal muscles.

If you had a vaginal delivery:

- Wait until your 6 week GP check before trying sexual intercourse.
- Your pelvic floor muscle exercises can help with your recovery!
- Hygiene is important - keep your perineum clean and dry to help with healing. Wash after emptying bowels with warm water and pat dry. A detachable shower head can be useful.
- **RICE** – the following techniques can help to reduce pain and swelling.

Rest

Lie down when you can and give your pelvic area a rest.

Ice

Ice pads can be made by putting a small amount of water on a menstrual pad and then placing it in a clean part of the freezer. Apply the ice pad in your underwear for 10 mins, repeat every 2-3 hours for the first 3 days. Always making sure to remove the ice pad after 10 minutes to prevent it becoming damp – remember you want to keep the vaginal area dry!

Compression

Use firm, breathable (cotton) underwear.

Elevation

Lie down, breastfeed baby on your side if possible.
If you had a caesarean delivery:

- Healing can take between 6 and 12 weeks.
- Avoid heavy or strenuous activity in the first 6 weeks then slowly build up as comfortable. If you feel tired or your body aches, you need to rest.
- Modifying every day activities: Light housework such as cooking and dusting is okay. Avoid vacuuming and lifting anything heavier than your baby in the first 6 to 8 weeks.
- Driving may be safe after 2 weeks if you are able to brake suddenly in an emergency, move feet between pedals and look over your shoulder without pain. However, some car insurance companies do not cover you in the first 6 weeks after abdominal surgery, so it is best to contact them and check before driving.
- Do the exercises in this pamphlet as soon as you feel comfortable – usually around day 3. Stop if you feel pain.
- Your pelvic floor muscle exercises can help your recovery!
- If you have ongoing pain at your scar site please contact your doctor, midwife or physiotherapist – sometimes scar tissue can cause discomfort after healing is complete, your physiotherapist can help with this.
- Please speak with your physiotherapist for further information.

Good Bladder Habits

Initially post-birth, your bladder has to do a lot of extra work as your body loses all the pregnancy fluids. It is important to take extra care of your bladder. Some women might need more care to manage bladder symptoms.

Normal bladder habits:

- Emptying the bladder 4-6 times per day and 0-1 time per night.
- Volume of urine each toilet visit is 250-500mls.
- Emptying your bladder when you feel comfortably full (no sooner, no later).
If you notice any of the following please let your midwife or physiotherapist know:

- Reduced bladder sensation or no bladder sensation.
- Difficulty starting the flow of urine.
- Leakage of urine.
- A flow that is slow or stops/starts.
- Incomplete emptying of your bladder.
- Pain or burning with urinating.
- Urinary leakage when you cough, sneeze, laugh or during exercise.
- Having to rush to get to the toilet.

**Important bladder habits to practise:**

**First 2-3 days post birth:**
- Aim to drink 2-3 litres of fluid each day.
- Water helps to dilute your urine and will make it more comfortable to pass.
- Go to the toilet every 2-3 hours (unless told otherwise by your physiotherapist, midwife or doctor). Your bladder fills quickly post birth and this will help to prevent overstretching of your bladder.

**Long term:**
- Aim to drink 1.5-2.0 litres of fluid every day (3.0 litres if breastfeeding).
- Try to limit caffeine, alcohol, soft drinks and artificial sweeteners. These can irritate your bladder.
- Make sure you sit on the toilet, relax your tummy and take your time so your bladder can empty fully. Do not rush. Do not hover/squat over the toilet.
- Go to the toilet when your bladder feels comfortably full. Do not go to the toilet ‘just in case’ as this can confuse your bladder. Do not wait until you are very urgent as this can overstretch your bladder and increase risk of urinary leakage.
- Doing your pelvic floor muscle exercises can help with bladder control.
- Do not push downwards to speed up the urine flow; this will put strain through your pelvic floor muscles.
Good Bowel Habits

During pregnancy there is increased pressure on the bowels from the baby. Childbirth also places strain on the bowels. Hormonal changes and iron supplements can change your bowel habits. It is important to monitor your bowels and make sure they are healthy and regular.

Important bowel habits to practise:

- Do NOT put off going – go with the urge.
- Eat plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and unprocessed food. Prune, pear and apple juices are natural laxatives.
- Avoid constipation and straining – this leads to weaker pelvic floor muscles and reduced bowel control. Haemorrhoids, anal fissures and prolapse can also result from straining.
- If you have pain, swelling or stitches, support the area between the vagina and anus with a pad or toilet paper while you empty your bowels.
- Exercise daily for 30 minutes to keep your bowel regular – walking is particularly good in the first 6 weeks.
- Sit correctly on the toilet (see diagram on the next page).
- Pelvic floor muscle training can help to control your back passage.
- Reducing stress, a healthy diet, healthy fluid intake and exercise can help keep your bowels regular.

Normal bowel habits:

- Go when you get a good urge.
- 3 times per day or 3 times per week is a normal amount to empty your bowels.
- It should take 1-3 minutes to empty your bowels. Come back later if you need to.
Sitting correctly on the toilet:

This helps to empty the bowel.

- Sit on the toilet – do not hover or squat.
- Keep you back straight, lean forward and rest your forearms on your knees.
- Have your legs apart and feet on a small stool – aiming for knees higher than your hips.
- Bulge and brace to empty your bowels – bulge your stomach forward and brace to make your waist wider.
- Activate the correct muscles and avoid breath holding and straining – make a ‘hisssss’ noise which helps to open the back passage.
- Once you have finished pull up your pelvic floor muscles around the back passage.

Exercise Guidelines Following Birth

Benefits of Exercise

- Helps with physical recovery of muscles affected by pregnancy and childbirth.
- Assists with weight control.
- Improves health and fitness.
- Facilitates mental wellbeing.
- Sets a good example for your children.

It takes up to 6 months for the ligaments in your body to return to normal. Return to exercise slowly. Follow these guidelines to allow your body to return to exercise safely.
Pelvic Floor Muscles

What are the Pelvic Floor Muscles?

Your pelvic floor muscles are a ‘hammock’ that support your pelvic organs. They sit in your pelvis, from your pubic bone to your tailbone, and attach to the side of your pelvic bones. Your urethra (bladder opening), vagina and back passage pass through these muscles.

During pregnancy and childbirth these muscles are under a lot of additional stress and will stretch. It is therefore an important time for you to be exercising these muscles to reduce the risk of having any bladder or bowel problems after birth.

Useful Website:

Reasons to do pelvic floor exercises:

1. Maintain bladder control, prevent urgency and leakage of urine.
2. Maintain bowel control.
3. Improved sexual function.
4. Prevention of or reduction of prolapse.
5. Back support.
6. Strengthen core muscles (and flatten stomach!).

Pelvic Floor Apps can be great tools to use. Some FREE Apps include:

- Pregnancy Pelvic Floor Plan.
- Pelvic Floor First app (provided by the Continence Foundation of Australia).

Exercise guidelines in the first 6 weeks post birth

- Pelvic floor muscle exercises.
- Abdominal muscle exercises.
- Walking.

The female pelvic floor
How to practise your pelvic floor exercises:

**Immediately after having your baby: 0-1 week**

- **Stage 1:**
  
  Start gentle pelvic floor exercises within 24 hours – even if you have stitches or swelling. The muscle pumping action improves circulation to the area. This will help reduce swelling and improve healing!

- Squeeze and lift the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage – as if you are trying to stop urine from coming out. Then let go, making sure the muscles are fully relaxed.

- Repeat short sessions frequently – 4 to 5 gentle contractions, lift and let go each hour.

- Any position is fine. It can be easier to start lying on your side and aim to progress to sitting or standing as soon as you can.

**Ongoing exercises: 1 week onwards**

- Squeeze and lift the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage – as if you are trying to stop urine from coming out.

- Then let go, making sure the muscles are fully relaxed.

- You should feel a little contraction at your front and back passage but should not see any movement on the outside of your body.

- Breathe normally - Do not hold your breath!

- Keep buttocks and thighs relaxed – if you are using these muscles you are doing too much.

- It is easier to start lying down on your side. You can progress to sitting or standing as able.
• **Stage 2:**
  Gradually increase the strength of each lift as the pain reduces.
  
  - Squeeze, lift and let go. Then rest for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 - 10 at a time.
  
  - Practise this 3 times a day.
  
  - Once you have achieved stage 2 add stage 3 into your daily regime.

• **Stage 3:**
  Gradually increase the endurance of your contraction as you are able.
  
  - Squeeze, lift and hold for up to 10 seconds. Let go and rest for 10 seconds. You may only be able to hold for 1 or 2 seconds when you first start. Repeat 5-10 at a time. Practise this 3 times a day.
  
  - Make sure the muscles are fully relaxed after the hold.

• Practise stage 2 and 3 alternatively to continue working on the strength and endurance of the muscles!

Work on this program daily for 3 to 6 months to ensure that your pelvic floor muscles are supporting you every day. Pelvic floor muscle training can take time; you may not see results straight away!

Daily lifestyle can also impact the pelvic floor muscles. It is important to avoid constipation or straining as this puts extra pressure through the pelvic floor muscles. Maintaining a healthy weight and regular physical activity every day can help too.

*If you are unsure about how to do pelvic floor exercises, please make an appointment to see a Women’s Health Physiotherapist.*
Abdominal Exercises

The abdominal muscles are stretched during pregnancy. As part of your recovery post birth, it is important to exercise this group of muscles. This will help their recovery and assist in back and stomach support.

Aim for 10-15 repetitions of the following exercises, twice a day.

1. Deep Abdominal and Pelvic Floor Muscles – your ‘core muscles’
   - Lie on your back with both knees bent up or on your side.
   - Breathe normally.
   - Let your tummy completely relax. Gently draw in your lower stomach towards your spine as you breathe out. Then relax.
   - You can use your hands to help guide the exercise. Place your hands over your lower stomach, you should feel the stomach pulling away from your hands as you draw the muscle in towards your spine.
   - Repeat this 10 times.
   - Gradually increase the time you can hold the contraction for. Aim to hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times.
   - You can challenge yourself by changing the position you are in. Try to progress to sitting or standing.

2. Pelvic rocking/tilting:
   - Lie on your back.
   - Draw in your pelvic floor and lower stomach muscles. Tilt
the hip bones backwards so your back flattens into the bed and your tailbone lifts slightly.

- Keep your bottom on the bed or floor. Hold for 5 seconds, breathing normally. Repeat 5 – 10 times.

**3. Knee rolling:**

- Lie on your back with both knees bent up. Roll both knees gently to each side, keeping your shoulders flat. Relax your body, breathe deeply.

**4. Crossovers:**

- Sit upright at the front of your chair. Put your right hand on the inside of your left knee then tighten your lower tummy muscles.

- Press the hand against the knee and stop the knee moving inwards, feel your abdominal muscles tighten. Keep your body still. Hold for 5 seconds breathing normally. Repeat 5-10 times. Repeat with opposite arm and leg. Practise 3 times a day.
General Exercise

A daily walk is a good way to loosen up and improve fitness (from week 1). Start with shorter distances (approximately 10-15 minutes) on flat ground and then slowly progress the distance and difficulty as comfortable.

Exercise guidelines after 6 weeks:

At 6 weeks post birth you can commence other types of exercise. Low impact exercises are recommended. It takes up to 6 months for the ligaments in your body to return to normal after birth. Returning to any exercise should be gradual. If you have pelvic floor muscle problems or a large separation of your stomach muscles please contact the physiotherapists for further guidance.

Some exercise tips…

- Continue your pelvic floor muscle exercises with gradual progression.
- Continue abdominal exercises with gradual progression.
- You can commence other types of exercise - aim for 30 minutes of low impact exercise per day.
- Osborne Park Hospital offers a postnatal exercise class for mums and babies – this is a great form of exercise to start with! The physiotherapist who takes the class can provide you with specific guidelines for your body.
- Swimming is an excellent form of exercise, however, be sure to have your 6 week GP check-up first to make sure that any stitches are healing well.
- Walking is another great form of exercise, aiming to increase the duration gradually.
- Involve your baby in your exercise program!
- Avoid jumping and jarring activities (e.g. jogging, high impact aerobics) for the first 3-6 months. You may check with a Women’s Health physiotherapist to see when it is suitable for you to resume high impact activity.
• It is important that you get your pelvic floor muscles and stomach muscle separation checked before you start more intensive exercise. You can attend the Osborne Park Hospital Postnatal Exercise Class where the physiotherapist can assess both of these for you. If you have any problems, contact the Physiotherapy Department.
Rectus Abdominal Diastasis (RAD) – ‘tummy separation’

During pregnancy there is a lot of stretch occurring at your abdominal muscles and they may separate.

It is important to get this separation or ‘gap’ checked by one of the physiotherapists post birth. Some women may have a larger separation than others and will require post birth physiotherapy care.

The abdominal exercises in this booklet will help with the recovery of these muscles.

The physiotherapist at the postnatal fitness classes will check your abdominal muscles every month and give you safe exercises to help your abdominals to recover – this is a great way to check them regularly!

For more information contact the Osborne Park Hospital Physiotherapy Department.
Back Care

Your back is at risk after having your baby as your ligaments and muscles are still weak from pregnancy and you will be lifting, bending and sitting more than usual.

Check your posture!

When standing and sitting upright, your pelvic floor muscles and lower stomach muscles should switch on. Good posture is a great form of exercise for your back!

- Stand tall, lengthen your spine.
- Feel your shoulders drop downwards.
- Chest open.
- Pelvic floor lift and your lower stomach muscles draw in.
- Feel the muscles surround and support your spine and pelvis.
Tips for protecting your back

• Have any work surfaces at waist height.
• Avoid stooping over low surfaces.
• Kneel or squat instead of bending for low level jobs such as gardening or making beds.

When bending or lifting:

• Tuck in abdominals.
• Lift pelvic floor muscles upward.
• Keep breathing.
• Use your legs.

Remember: It usually takes six months after the birth of your baby for your muscles and ligaments to recover. Breastfeeding may also relax muscles and ligaments. Once you have stopped breastfeeding it will take up to six weeks for your muscles and ligaments to return to normal.
Handling your Baby

Correct handling of your baby is important for good back care!
• Pick up your baby or toddler using a good lifting technique.

• Feeding your baby in a chair gives better comfort and support than sitting in bed.

• Lying down when feeding gives your body a rest.

• When bathing baby ensure bath is at waist height. Keep your back straight.

• When lifting, stand close to the object (e.g. high chair or pram), bend your knees and keep your baby close to your chest. Avoid twisting as you lift.

• When lifting your baby off the bed avoid twisting your back by placing one knee on the bed. Half kneeling at the corner of the bed reduces back strain.

• Kneel on the seat or put your foot on the ledge when putting baby in the car.

• The correct height for a change table is at waist height.

• Use a laundry trolley when possible, or carry washing in smaller loads.

• Never carry a full baby bath, use a jug or bucket to fill and empty.
Breathing and Relaxation

Breathing and relaxation are good exercises for your mind. The benefits include:

- Helps calm you and your baby
- Assists with milk release
- Improves energy levels
- Reduces stress for yourself and others around you
- Helps you cope with everyday demands.

To allow your body to relax, it is important to first recognise areas of tension in your body. This may present like:

- Muscle tension (jaws and shoulders)
- Anxiety or irritability
- Headache
- Upper chest breathing
- Difficulty coping.

Learning to relax is an important exercise to help with daily stressors in life. You should practise relaxation at the following times:

- When you feel stressed or anxious
- While feeding your baby
- Resting during the day
- Before going to sleep.
**How to relax:**

- Breathe in slowly and sigh out
- Focus on one activity at a time - clear your mind
- Release muscle tension - relax jaw so teeth are apart and drop shoulders down and back.

*If you feel unable to cope, ask for help from family and friends or speak to your doctor or child health nurse.*
Baby development

Tummy time for baby

Tummy time is an important exercise for babies where they have supervised time on their stomach. This can help with baby’s development and encourages good head control. It is a wonderful position for massage, play and talking!

There are many ways to build tummy time into the day:

- Carrying your baby face down over your forearm.
- Lying with baby propped up on their forearms on your chest - this is good for bonding time too!
- Sitting with baby face down over your thighs.
- Place baby on firm, flat surface (carpet or rug) on the floor for short periods and often.
- Newborn babies can be placed on their tummy when awake but they must be supervised at all times.
- Regular tummy time is important from day one.

Aim for a total of 20 minutes daily. Try a little bit and often – one minute sessions 20 times per day are as good as one 20 minute session.

Simple exercises for baby development:

- Lay your baby on their side when they are awake to improve hand to mouth movements and grasping objects.
- Pick up your baby by rolling.
- Baby massage.
Baby massage:

- Time used for massage can be relaxing and enjoyable for both you and your baby e.g. after a bath or when baby is lying on your lap.
- Use massage at a quiet, settled time.
- Undress baby as much as possible.
- Use pure edible oil (e.g. apricot, light olive).
- Put oil onto your hands – not directly onto baby.
- Use firm, smooth continuous strokes with as much hand contact as possible e.g. using palm of hand or flats of fingers.
- If stroking on chest, use diagonals (e.g. shoulder to opposite hip).
- If stroking on the back, use long strokes down the back.
- Stroking can also be used on the face, head and limbs.
Useful Contacts:

Osborne Park Hospital:
T: 9346 8000
Please ask to speak with the Physiotherapy Department.

Public Hospital Women’s Health Contacts:

Physiotherapy services are available at the following sites. A referral may be required prior to your appointment. Your General Practitioner (GP) has access to a central referral system which will direct your referral to the nearest public hospital that offers Women’s Health and Continence Services.

- Armadale Kelmscott Health Service 9391 2281
- Bentley Health Service 9416 3200
- Fiona Stanley Hospital 6152 2222
- Fremantle Hospital 9431 2533
- Joondalup Health Campus 9400 9430
- King Edward Memorial Hospital 6458 2790
- Mandurah Community Health Centre 9586 4400
- Midland Hospital 9462 4030
- Osborne Park Hospital 9346 8439
- Rockingham Kwinana District Hospital 9599 4000
- Royal Perth Hospital 9224 2076

Private Women’s Health Physiotherapy

Ring the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 9389 9211 or go to www.physiotherapy.asn.au and click on ‘Continence and Women’s Health WA’ for the contact number of a physiotherapist in your area. No referral required.
Pelvic Floor Muscle Diary:

Tick the day that you complete your pelvic floor exercises. Try to get 3 ticks each day!

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Compiled by the Osborne Park Hospital Physiotherapy Department.

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