

Improving your recovery after birth

Care in the early stages following birth

In the early stages following your baby's birth we recommend you follow some simple steps which will improve your postnatal recovery.

Ice

Ice helps to reduce pain and swelling around the perineum following a vaginal birth. It is particularly helpful within the first 48 hours following delivery.

Ice should be placed inside a clean dry pad for approximately 10-15 minutes every 2-3 hours. Between each icing session the pad should be removed, the perineum dried and a clean dry pad applied.

Compression

Firm supportive underwear will help to support the perineum and the lower abdominal muscles. This reduces pain and discomfort.

Elevation

You may like to try lying on your front for short periods with a pillow under your stomach and two pillows under your hips. This will elevate your perineum and assist with swelling reduction.

Exercise

Pelvic floor muscle exercises can assist with swelling and healing around any stitches you may have. They can be safely started gently 1-2 days following the birth provided they do not cause any increase in pain.

Getting in and out of bed

The most comfortable way to get in and out of bed following birth is to log roll. To do this please follow the simple instructions below.

To get out of bed:

- Roll on to your side
- Keeping your legs together lower them off the edge of the bed
- Push yourself up into sitting with your arms

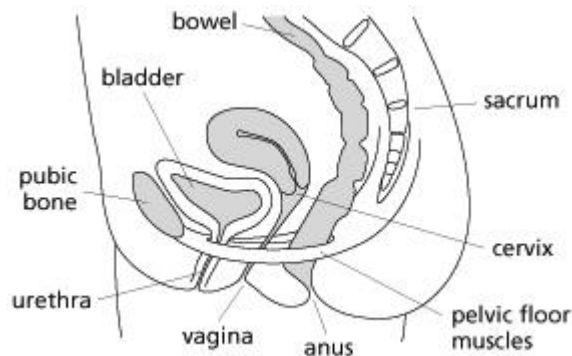
To get in to bed:

- Sit on the edge of the bed
- Lower yourself on to your side
- Roll on to your back



The Pelvic floor

The pelvic floor muscles are a relatively small but very important group of muscles. They lie deep inside the pelvis and act to support the pelvic organs and maintain continence of the bladder and bowel.



During pregnancy these muscles are weakened. This is partly due to pregnancy hormones and partly due to the weight of the growing baby. It is important that we exercise these muscles in the early postnatal period in order to restore good function and prevent problems such as incontinence.

If you experience any urinary leakage or trouble passing urine following the birth of your baby please notify your midwife, physiotherapist or doctor.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

Initially start in the lying position with your knees bent up and your feet flat.

Squeeze around your vagina and back passage as if you were trying to stop yourself passing wind or urine and try to squeeze and lift your pelvic floor up. This is a pelvic floor muscle contraction.

If you have difficulty doing this- do not worry. It may take some practice in the early postnatal period to achieve a noticeable contraction of your pelvic floor muscles. Continue to practice in this way until you are confident you are achieving a good contraction.



Once you are confident you are doing this try to do 10 pelvic floor contractions each time you feed your baby.

Each contraction should be held for “x” seconds.

“x” is how old your baby is in weeks.

For example:

When your baby is 0 weeks old do 10 contractions with the aim of stimulating circulation and muscle co-ordination.

When your baby is 1 week old do 10 contractions holding each contraction for 1 second each.

When your baby is 2 weeks old do 10 contractions holding each contraction for 2 seconds

And so on until your baby is 6 weeks old.

Following this time you should continue to do pelvic floor exercises 3-4 times a day aiming to be able to do:

10 contractions holding for 10 seconds and

10-20 quick squeezes.

Functional bracing

In addition tighten your pelvic floor when you cough, sneeze or laugh and when you are doing daily activities that require effort for example, lifting.

Abdominal muscle exercises

After childbirth your abdominal muscles remain stretched for a while. They are not strong enough to control your pelvis during “sit ups” for 4-8 weeks. You should start with gentle contractions of your deepest layer of tummy muscles (called the transversus abdominus), which act as the body’s “natural corset”.

- Relax your abdominal muscles, let your tummy sag
- Take a deep breath in
- As you *breathe out*, pull your belly button towards your spine. Make sure your back and pelvis stay still as you do this.
- Try and hold for a few seconds while breathing normally and repeat 4-5 times.
- Aim to slowly increase your length of hold and number of repetitions.



Remember to use these muscles to brace your spine as you lift and carry your baby.

Return to exercise

Begin your return to exercise by walking. Slowly increase the amount of walking you do and start out on flat surfaces before adding in hills. Bear in mind that you may tire more easily than usual- listen to your body and don't push yourself.

Low impact exercise can generally be commenced at 6 weeks. Post-natal pilates and yoga classes are popular and can usually be started at this time. It is important to have someone supervising your form when you return to pilates or yoga to ensure that you are using the right muscles for each exercise. Before you return to swimming you need to ensure that your wound has healed and your vaginal discharge has resolved. Check this with your doctor.

It is advisable to wait 3-4 months before returning to high impact exercise such as jogging, running and jumping activities. This is because your abdominal muscles and pelvic floor are weakened during pregnancy, and your joints have less support from your ligaments. This increases your risk of injury.

Regaining good bladder function

Following pregnancy your bladder can have reduced sensation and tone, so it is important to void regularly and ensure you are emptying your bladder completely. It can take around 2 weeks for normal function to return. Some women also find that it takes a few moments before the flow starts, or that the flow is slower than normal.

The following tips can help your bladder function return to normal:

- Drink water to thirst- try and have a glass of water each hour.
- Limit your caffeine intake.
- You should empty your bladder every 2-3 hours, whether you feel like you need to or not. During the night, void when your baby gets up to feed.
- You should be passing at least 200-300mls each time you pass urine and not over 700mls. If your passing a lot less than 200mls or more than 700mls, let your midwife or physiotherapist know.
- Sit well back on the toilet and relax your stomach to help your bladder empty. Some gentle support over your wound may make this more comfortable.

Good bowel habits

A lot of women have difficulty passing a bowel motion following the birth of their baby. It is important that your bowel motions are soft but well formed and that you avoid straining.

The following tips can make passing bowel motions more comfortable and less scary!

- Eat high fibre foods such as wholegrains, fruit and vegetables. Dietary fibre helps your stool to hold moisture, which keeps it soft and easier to pass.
- Drink plenty of water- this helps dietary fibre to work properly. If you don't drink enough fluid your stool may be drier and more difficult to pass.
- Fibre supplements/Stool softeners/laxatives: if your bowels haven't opened in 48 hours or if you are having difficulties passing a bowel motion then speak to your midwife about taking a supplement to assist you.

Try this position to help prevent straining:

- Place your feet on a footstool so that your knees are higher than your hips



- Lean forward and place your elbows on your knees
- BULGE your tummy out. Some gentle support over your perineum/caesarean wound may make this more comfortable.
- WAIT for the stool to descend- don't try and force it out.

Tips for back care and correct lifting

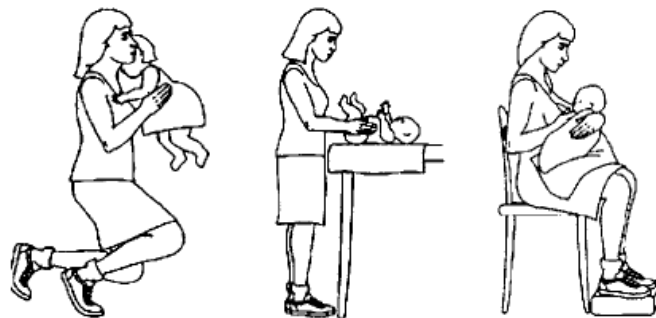
Bend your knees, keep your back straight and always tighten your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles.

Hold what you are lifting firmly and close to your body.

Avoid sudden or repetitive bending and twisting movements.

Make sure your work surfaces, for example bath and change table, are at waist height.

Make sure you are comfortable and supported for feeding. Place your bottom back in the chair, your feet flat and ensure you use the support of pillows to position your baby at the breast.



Your Baby

Don't forget tummy time is important for your baby.

Place your baby on their **Back** to sleep, **Tummy** to play

Sit up to watch the world.

For more information visit <http://www.sidsandkids.org/safe-sleeping/tummy-time/>



References:

"Improving your recovery after birth" (2010)- Royal Womens Hospital, Victoria

"Postnatal care in the first week guideline" (2010)- Southern Health, Victoria

"Pelvic Floor Recovery Essentials" (2011) Sue Croft

