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## Physical Therapy

### Postpartum Recovery



## Postpartum Recovery

### **Postpartum Recovery is Healing After Having a Baby**

Pelvic health physical therapists help people having pain, problems peeing or pooping, or problems having sex. You may see them while you are pregnant and after childbirth. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or want to see a Hennepin Healthcare pelvic health physical therapist.

<https://aptapelvichealth.org/ptlocator/> to find a pelvic health Physical Therapist near you.

Postpartum topics in this handout are:

- Back and Pelvic Pain
- Caring for Your Pelvic Floor Muscles
- Postpartum Depression and Baby Blues
- Posture(how you stand) and Body Mechanics
- Exercises for Your Core
- C-section Scar Care
- Sex



## Postpartum back and pelvic pain

Many people have back pain when they are pregnant and after the birth. If you have back pain during pregnancy, you are more likely to have back pain after birth. Back pain after birth can lead to pelvic floor problems like leaking pee.

### Common complaints:

#### **Pelvic Pain:**

- Buttock or hip pain
- Pubic or groin pain
- Tailbone pain
- Pain when changing positions:
  - Sit to stand
  - Going up / down stairs
  - Rolling over in bed and getting out of bed
  - Getting out of your car
- Popping or clicking caused by weak muscles and joints
- Pain that spreads to your groin or down the back of the leg
- Feeling as though the leg is “giving way”



#### **Low Back Pain:**

- Posture: Pain gets worse when you stand or sit for a long time.
- Body Mechanics: Pain gets worse with certain movements
- Less pain when you wake up in the morning
- Pain worsens into a dull ache as the day goes on

### What Can I Do If My Back Hurts?

- If you have sharp pain
  - Put ice on the part that hurts for 15 minutes
- If you have aching pain
  - Use heat on the part that hurts for 15 minutes
  - Do not place heat over your belly during pregnancy
- Have a helper massage sore muscles
- Exercise (listed below under Exercises for Your Core)

### How to Care For Your Back

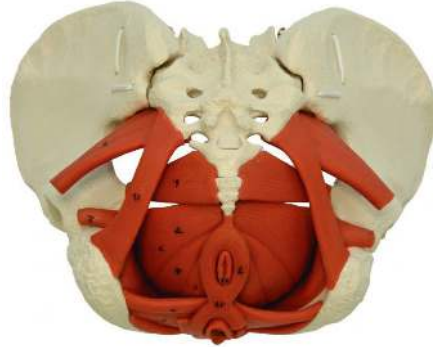
- Use good posture throughout the day
- Do not sit cross-legged
- Do not stand on one leg with your hip jutting out
- Use deep core muscles when lifting your baby, weights, or groceries.
  - Point your toes at what you are lifting.
  - Squeeze and lift your pelvic floor muscles up and in. Pull your lower ab muscles inward
  - Bend from the knees and hips, not your back
  - Breathe while lifting, do not hold breath.

## Caring for your pelvic floor muscles

Pelvic floor muscles can be strained and hurt during pregnancy and birth. Problems with these muscles should be resolved within 4-6 weeks after birth. If you have problems after 6 weeks let your healthcare team know.

### **Pelvic floor problems may involve:**

- Feeling pressure in the vagina or rectum
- Leaking pee
- Problems holding back gas
- Pain with sex



### **How to find the pelvic floor muscles**

- Squeeze the muscles around the vagina and anus as if you are trying to hold in gas. Tighten the muscles you would use to hold the gas in. No one should be able to tell you are doing this. Try to keep your buttocks and thighs relaxed.
- Put a clean finger into the vagina and squeeze the muscles around your finger

### **Exercise the pelvic floor muscles**

You can start these exercises right away after childbirth. These exercises can help lower swelling and prevent problems later in life.

### **Exercises for after birth**

- Lift the pelvic floor muscles by squeezing the muscles you use to hold in gas
  - Hold this squeeze while you count out loud to 5
    - Counting out loud is a way to make sure you are not holding your breath
  - Relax for 10 second before doing it again
    - Relaxing the pelvic floor muscles is just as important as the squeeze
- Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles while breathing out
  - Work up to 10 second holds 10 times. Do this 3-4 times each day
  - You can do this lying down, sitting or standing
- Practice doing a quick strong squeeze before:
  - Coughing
  - Sneezing
  - Laughing
  - Lifting



## Postpartum Depression and Back and Pelvic Pain

Postpartum depression is up to 3 times more common for new parents who have back or pelvic pain.

### **Do I Have Postpartum Depression?**

Postpartum depression most often starts within the first 90 days after birth. It can start up to 12 months after birth, or after you stop breastfeeding. People with postpartum depression need to get help right away from a healthcare expert.

### **Symptoms:**

- Strong feelings of sadness, worry, or anger
- Feeling that you cannot take care of yourself or your family
- Not wanting to do everyday tasks
- Cannot sleep or sleeping too much
- Loss of joy or want to do things that used to be fun
- Lack of interest in your baby
- Crying
- Not eating
- Overeating
- Not showering or getting dressed
- Cannot focus or remember things
- Always worried about your baby
- Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

### **Baby blues**

These symptoms are like postpartum depression, but start within 3-4 days after birth. It gets better within 10 days.

Symptoms may include:

- Feeling tearful
- Fatigued
- Grouchy
- Sad
- Mood swings
- Trouble focusing

### **Call your doctor if:**

- You always feel tired, even after a nap
- Others notice how tired you look
- You have headaches
- You feel depressed, nervous, or angry with your baby



## How can I help myself?

- Find support from friends and family for meals, housekeeping, baby sitting
- Look into a postpartum doula: [www.dona.org](http://www.dona.org)
- Reach out to others who have had the same feelings. You are not alone
- Talk to your doctor
- Help within Hennepin Healthcare
  - Mother-Baby Program
    - 612-873-4673 (HOPE) or 612-873-6262 (MAMA)
  - Counseling and psychiatry
- Resources in the twin cities
  - Anam Counseling
    - [www.anamcounseling.com/the-journey-of-motherhood](http://www.anamcounseling.com/the-journey-of-motherhood)
  - Minnehaha Therapy
    - [www.minnehahatherapy.com](http://www.minnehahatherapy.com)
- Resources in Minnesota
  - Pregnancy & Postpartum Support Minnesota
    - [www.ppsupportmn.org](http://www.ppsupportmn.org) 612-787-7776
    - [ppsmhelpline@gmail.com](mailto:ppsmhelpline@gmail.com)
    - National suicide lifeline number 988 (call/text)
    - COPE mental health emergencies Hennepin County 612-596-1223
- Visit these websites for more information and resources:
  - [www.napcs.org](http://www.napcs.org)
  - [www.dona.org](http://www.dona.org)
  - [www.cappa.net](http://www.cappa.net)
  - [www.postpartum.net](http://www.postpartum.net)
  - [www.momsclub.org](http://www.momsclub.org)
  - [www.mothersandmore.org](http://www.mothersandmore.org)
  - [www.postpartumdads.org](http://www.postpartumdads.org)
  - [www.seemommyrun.com](http://www.seemommyrun.com)
  - [www.mothersacrossamerica.com](http://www.mothersacrossamerica.com)



## Postpartum Posture and Body Mechanics

### Good posture rules

- Keep your back slightly arched and bend your knees when lifting your baby
- Pull in and lift up your lower belly muscles. Keep breathing before standing or lifting
- Hold your baby, or other objects, close to your body
- When feeding your baby (nursing or bottle feeding)
  - Sit up nice and tall in your chair
    - Back against the back of the chair
    - Feet supported either on the floor or footstool
  - Bring the baby to the breast
  - Support the baby with a boppy or pillows to lower strain on your body
  - Be sure to switch sides
  - Do not spend the whole feeding session looking down at your baby
    - Take a moment after to stretch your neck muscles and roll your shoulders back
  - Try other nursing positions



## Exercises to Improve Your Core

### The Stomach Muscles

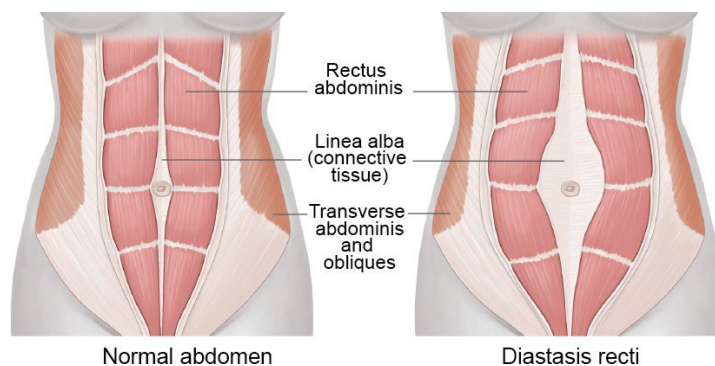
- Become stretched and/ or weak during pregnancy
- Help in breathing, coughing, sneezing, and bowel movements
- Help stop problems such as back pain, leaking pee, and hard bowel movements
- Give support to the trunk
- Support the back during lifting
- Keep good posture

### General Exercise Guidelines

- Exercises must be done the right way for the best results
- It is better to do the movements right than trying to do a lot of movements
- It may take weeks or months to notice changes in the muscles
- Do not do sit ups or crunches for 6 weeks if you had a c-section
- Talk to a physical therapist for harder exercises when you are ready

### Diastasis Recti

During pregnancy the stomach muscles can become stretched enough to separate. This is normal and is called diastasis recti. Belly muscles do not work well when someone has diastasis recti. This may lead to low back or pelvic pain.



### **How to check yourself:**

- Lie on your back, place your fingers in the center of your belly just above the belly button
- Slowly lift your head and shoulder blades up off the bed while feeling how many fingers you can put in between your stomach muscles
- If you have can put in 2 or more fingers ask your doctor to see physical therapy

### **Other things to look for**

- Do you have tissue bulging or caving in when getting up out of bed?

### **Stage 1 exercises**

Unless told by your doctor you can start these exercises right after giving birth:

- Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles while exhaling. This is easier as the pelvic floor lifts when you breath out
  - Work up to 10 second holds 10 times. Do this 3-4 times each day



- You can do this lying down, sitting or standing
- Pull in and lift up your lower belly muscles making sure you keep breathing
  - Hold for 5 seconds repeat 10 times
- Diaphragmatic breathing
  - Place one hand on your chest and the other hand on your belly.
  - As you breathe in, feel your belly fill while your lower ribs grow out to the side
  - Allow the chest and shoulders to be quiet, relaxed, and still as you breathe in using your diaphragm.
  - When you breathe out, allow the belly and ribs to relax back inward
  - Do this daily for 2-5 minutes
- Go for a walk
  - Start with a short distance and slowly go farther each time as you are able



### **Stage 2 exercise**

Start these 2 weeks after giving birth

- Heel slides
  - Lie on the floor with both knees bent and both feet flat on the floor
  - Draw in your lower belly muscles
  - Keep your belly tight and slowly slide one leg down until it is flat
  - Keep your belly tight and slowly slide your leg back to a bent position
  - Relax your belly
  - Repeat on both legs

## Cesarean Scar Management

### What is scar care?

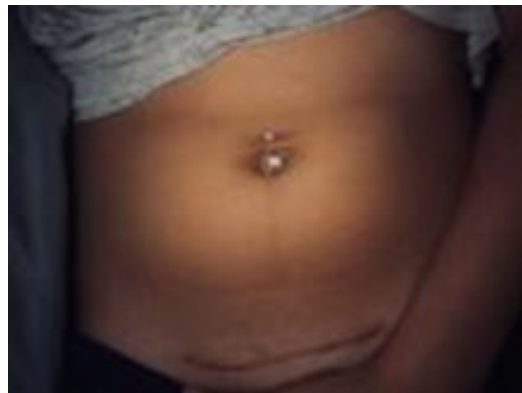
- Scar care will help the scar heal well
- It lowers infection, aids skin and tissue motion and stretches the fully healed scar
- Scar massage will lower the amount of scar tissue.

### When should you start?

- Day after surgery (0-6 weeks)
  - Make sure the incision is kept clean and dry
  - Do not touch the incision until it is fully healed - about 6 weeks
  - Massage your belly above the incision starting near your rib cage and moving the skin in gentle circles
- 4-6 weeks after surgery
  - Talk with your doctor to make sure your incision is fully healed
  - Do the massage 2-3 times each day for 5-10 minutes each
    - You can do this as part of your shower routine

### How do you do scar massage?

- Using lotion, start with a light, slow pressure over the scar
- Use gentle pressure and make little circles
- Progress to a firmer pressure as you are able to handle it
- Move away from sensitive areas if it gets to be too much
- Expose the scar with textures from clothing, towels, and sheets



## Postpartum Sexual Healing

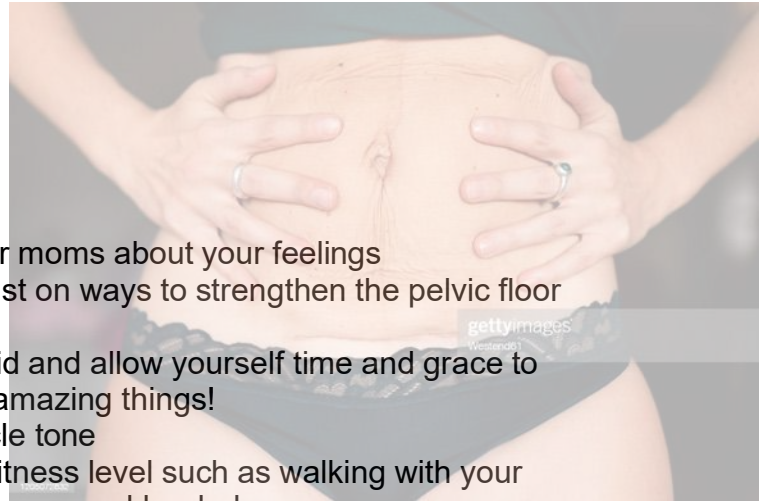
### Common Questions

#### **When can I have sex again?**

- Your doctor will let you know when it is safe to have sex
- Bleeding stops by 2 weeks. Call your doctor if this is not the case
- The perineum most often heals by 6 weeks. A large tear or episiotomy may take up to 6-12 months to heal. A pelvic physical therapist can help with this

#### **What Happened to my body?**

- Common fears about body image:
  - Weight gain
  - Change in how vagina looks
  - Loss of muscle tone
  - Being out of shape
- What to do:
  - Talk with your partner and other moms about your feelings
  - Talk to a pelvic physical therapist on ways to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles
  - Know that your feelings are valid and allow yourself time and grace to heal. Your body has just done amazing things!
  - Exercise to help stomach muscle tone
  - Exercise to help improve your fitness level such as walking with your baby. Try walking with another mom and her baby



#### **Possible causes for decreased sex drive**

- Needs of the newborn
- Lack of sleep
- Breastfeeding
  - Causes less estrogen which often results in vaginal dryness
  - Nipple sensitivity
- Body image issues
- Painful sex

#### **Treatments for decreased sex drive**

- Physical therapy for painful sex
- Get help with postpartum fatigue
- Get help with postpartum blues and depression
- Be patient, enjoy touching and cuddling
- Exercises

#### **Why can having sex hurt?**

##### **Possible causes:**

- Vaginal dryness
- Scar pain after episiotomy
- Tearing and trauma to the muscles in the vagina

**Treatments include:**

- Physical therapy for tissue massage and muscle re-training
- Focus on relaxing your pelvic floor muscles. Do not hold constant tension in this area
- Use of lube can be very helpful during sex
- Talk with your healthcare team about other choices

