



Care of Your Body in Pregnancy

For healthcare professionals to give to parents



Congratulations

- You are about to become a mum!!

This leaflet is designed to help you enjoy your pregnancy by showing you how to reduce the strain on your body during this time. It also tells you about some gentle exercises and relaxation techniques which can be practiced from early pregnancy.

During pregnancy many changes occur to the body, including an increase in hormone levels and alterations in body shape. Combined with the increased load on the body from the growing baby, this can result in strains to joints and muscles. Therefore, pelvic girdle pain, low back pain, shoulder, rib and middle back pain and incontinence can occur.

To prevent and deal with these problems, the following exercises should be practiced.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

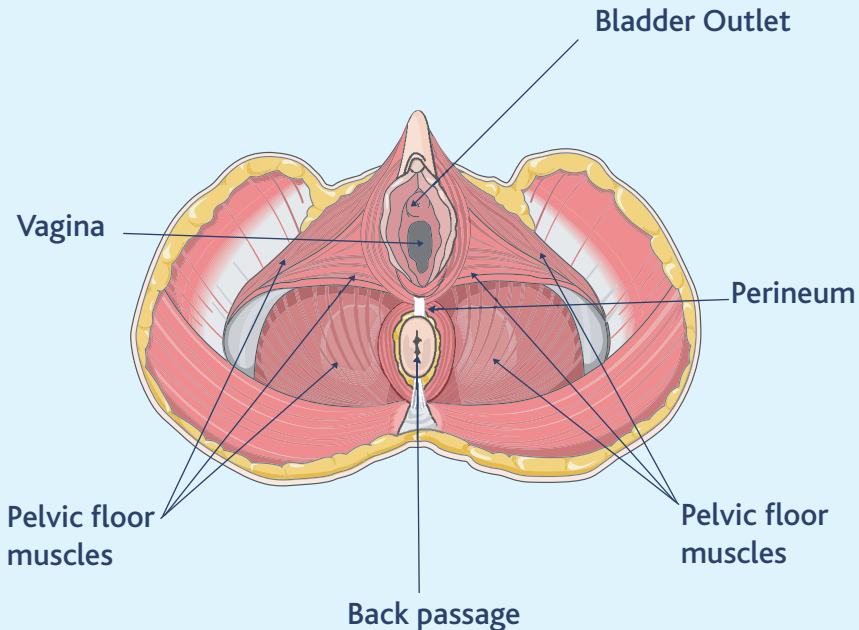
What are they?

The pelvic floor forms a broad sling of muscle, lying across the bottom of the pelvis, through which pass the openings from the bowel, vagina (birth passage) and the urethra (passage from the bladder).

They are the main support for the pelvic organs and give control of the three passages. It is important to keep them strong, as weakness of the pelvic floor can cause symptoms such as leakage of urine when coughing, urgent or frequent need to pass urine, leakage of wind and/or stool from the back passage, or decreased satisfaction during

intercourse. Leakage of urine (incontinence) is common, but not normal during pregnancy! It is a sign that the muscles are weak, and need strengthening.

These muscles are particularly challenged during pregnancy and childbirth, so it is really important to have them in as good a shape as possible pre-delivery. It is also very useful to be aware of how to completely relax the muscles after tightening them, as having the pelvic floor muscles completely relaxed during the delivery will reduce the likelihood of damage to the muscles.



How to Tighten the Pelvic Floor

- Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine mid-stream. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift', closing and drawing up the back and front passages. Hold the muscles up whilst breathing. Then relax fully and let your pelvic floor lower again. Always rest for a few seconds before repeating this exercise.
- Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10 repetitions at a time). This routine should be practiced as often as possible. You should feel your lower tummy (below your tummy button) tightening gently as you do this. However, it is very important to do this exercise without pulling in your whole tummy, squeezing your legs together, tightening your buttocks or holding your breath.
- Add some quick strong squeezes to the 10-second hold, remembering to relax completely after each exercise.
- Quickly lift and squeeze your pelvic floor muscles prior to laughing, coughing, sneezing or lifting; this will protect the pelvic floor and prevent undue pressure on the muscles. This technique is known as "the knack". Get into the habit of using "the knack" in all situations where extra pressure is coming on the pelvic floor, including each time you stand up.
- Doing the pelvic floor exercise is like operating an elevator. Initially, you will only be able to take the elevator up to the first few floors, but as you get stronger, you will be able to go right up to the top (tenth) floor. Aim as part of your exercise routine to do some exercises, holding the muscle at the third floor, but aiming to hold for 20 seconds as this will improve your endurance; at other times, take the elevator to the top floor, but hold for 10 seconds. This will improve the muscle strength.

Remember, **pelvic floor exercises are for life**. Get into the habit of doing these exercises several times a day. They can be done at any time and in any position. If done correctly, no one should know you are doing them, so they can be done while standing in queues, talking on the phone, at meetings, etc! It is a good idea to make them part of your daily routine i.e doing them each time you brush your teeth.

How to know if you are doing your exercises correctly:

1

Try to gently slow or stop the flow of urine towards the end of your stream, then relax and finish emptying your bladder.

This is a test, and not an exercise. It should not be done more than once a week.

2

Gently insert two fingers into your vagina, and try to feel the muscles contract from the back, sides and front.

3

When having intercourse, try squeezing around your partner's penis. Your partner will be delighted to give you feedback as to how your strength is improving!

If in doubt, ask your GP to refer you to a Chartered Physiotherapist in Women's Health.

Increased awareness of your pelvic floor will be of great benefit to you during labour, as when you learn how to contract your pelvic floor, you also learn to relax it; a relaxed pelvic floor is essential during the delivery of your baby.



To Help Reduce Backache

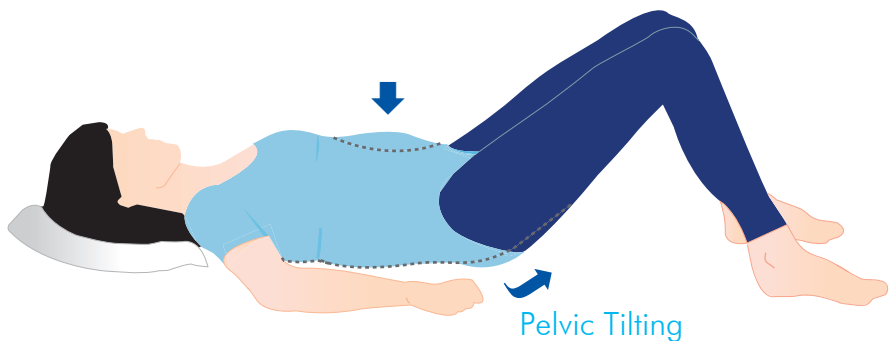
Pelvic tilt

With your head on a pillow, lie on your back* with knees bent and feet flat on the bed:

- Draw in your belly button and gently flatten your lower back into the bed.
- As you flatten your back your buttocks will gently raise up off the bed.
- Hold this position for 5-10 seconds (it is important not to hold your breath), then gently let go.
- Repeat 10 times.

Once you have mastered this exercise, it can be practiced in any position, side-lying, sitting or standing.

***N.B.** It is recommended that from the time you are 14 weeks pregnant onwards, you do not lie on your back, as this position can result in low blood pressure, which can affect both you and your baby. From 14 weeks pregnant onwards, practice this exercise in side-lying.

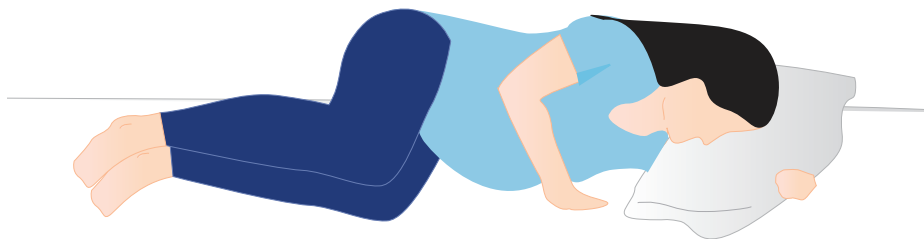


Deep tummy exercise

Lie on your side with your knees bent:

- Breathe in; as you breathe out, gently draw your lower abdomen in towards your spine.
- Hold for a few seconds, **breathing normally**, then relax. Be careful not to move your back or pelvis.
- Start holding for 5 seconds and progress to holding for 10 seconds as you get stronger.
- Repeat 10 times.
- Try drawing in your pelvic floor at the same time if possible.

This exercise can also be done both sitting and standing, once you have mastered it in side-lying. While doing this exercise, remember that your baby is getting a hug from you each time you do it, so aim to give your baby at least 100 hugs a day!



Good Posture

Good posture is important as it minimises stress and strain on your body, especially on your lower back. Use the previous two exercises to help you stand and walk tall. Remember to hug your baby frequently.

Using your back correctly helps to prevent strain.

Pointers for good posture:

In standing, aim to keep your

- Ears over your shoulders,
- Shoulders over your hips,
- Hips over your knees,
- Knees over your ankles.

Also

- Keep your collarbone broad,
- Maintain gentle tension in your lower abdominal muscles, gently hugging your baby,
- Keep your knees soft (not rigid),
- Maintain even weight distribution through the middle of both feet.

In **A**. pregnant lady has poor posture. In **B**. pregnant lady has good posture.

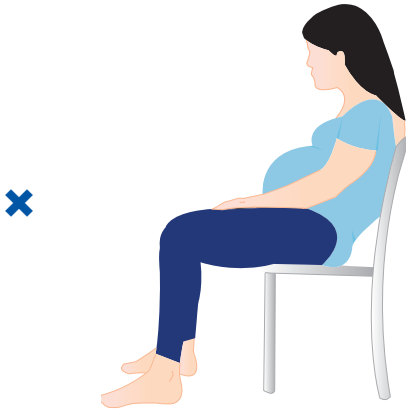
A



B



DON'T



DO



Always sit with your buttocks positioned into the back of the chair. Avoid dropping your head forwards. Avoid crossing your legs.

✘



✔



Good posture is important at work and when doing household jobs.

Avoid heavy lifting and any unnecessary lifting. Divide shopping loads into smaller bags, and make more frequent trips from car to house when unloading, rather than carrying heavy amounts in one load.

DON'T



DO



Pelvic Girdle Dysfunction

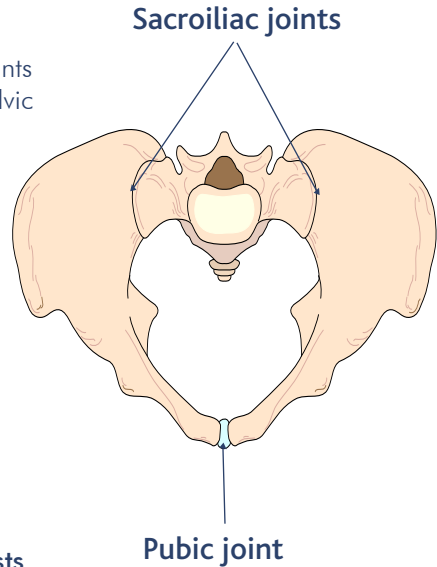
What are they?

There are three joints in the pelvis, one at the front and two at the back.

Some women suffer from aching in these joints during pregnancy, a condition known as pelvic girdle dysfunction. Pain in the low back in the area between the iliac crest (hip-bone) and the gluteal fold, with/without pain in the pelvic joints, may indicate that you have this problem.

DO NOT SUFFER IN SILENCE.

This is a very treatable condition, and it is important that it is diagnosed and treated early by a Chartered Physiotherapist in Women's Health, to prevent further dysfunction. Get your GP to refer you to an appropriate Physiotherapist, or contact the **Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP)*** for further information.



To minimise the discomfort associated with pelvic girdle dysfunction:

- Remain active within pain limits.
- Accept offers of help.
- Remember that rest is important.
- Plan the day to pace yourself so you have periods of activity interspersed with periods of rest.
- Avoid standing on one leg.
- Avoid asymmetrical positions of the pelvis, so do not cross your legs.
- Try different sleep postures.
- Avoid unnecessary trips up and down stairs.

Don't be afraid of your pain.

- Don't be afraid to separate your legs. It is important to maintain good range of motion between your legs for the delivery.
- Getting in and out of car, "walk your legs in sideways", i.e. getting into the driver's seat, move left leg in as far as you can without discomfort, then follow with your right leg; keep repeating this manoeuvre until you are seated in the seat. Getting out of the car repeat manoeuvre leading with right leg.
- When rolling over in bed, bend knees, hold them together, and tighten your tummy and seat muscles and then roll. It is less strain on your body to turn under, not over when turning from side to side, i.e. go from your right side, towards your tummy, propping yourself on your elbows, then onto your left side.
- If you have young children, do not carry them on one hip.
- To get up from lying down always bend your knees, press them together (as when rolling over) and roll onto your side before sitting up – reverse to lie down.
- When resting in bed, in side-lying, put a pillow between the knees and feet, and a rolled-up towel or small pillow under the baby, going from below the breast to the hip, this will provide support to your back.



Some useful websites regarding pelvic girdle pain are as follows:

- www.acpwh.org.uk
Where you will find a patient information leaflet on Pelvic Girdle Pain.

Full details:

http://www.acpwh.org.uk/docs/ACPWH-PGP_Pat.pdf

Patient support group:

- www.pelvicpartnership.org.uk
- www.pelvicgirdlepain.com

General Exercise

It is good for you to continue with most of your usual sports and activities, as long as your pregnancy is progressing normally. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists recommend that, in the absence of medical or obstetric complications, 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise on most, if not all days of the week is recommended for pregnant women.

Moderate exercise intensity is being able to carry on a conversation while exercising (talk test). Brisk walking or swimming are excellent although if you experience pelvic girdle pain, it is advisable to avoid the breast-stroke.

Competitive sports are not recommended, as you may push yourself too far in the excitement of a competition.

Avoid taking up any new forms of exercise when pregnant.

Ask the Chartered Physiotherapist in Women's Health or midwife for advice.

- Listen to your body.
- Stop if it hurts.
- Stop when tired.
- Never exercise if feeling unwell.
- Always dress appropriately for your activity; good supportive footwear, runners are ideal; wear a well-supporting maternity bra; wear cool loose clothing.
- Drink plenty of fluid before and during exercise.
- Avoid over-heating.
- Always stay within the limits of the "talk test" when exercising.

Pilates or Yoga classes specifically designed for pregnancy are ideal.

Minor Problems

Cramps

This is due to changes in the body chemistry and changing pressures in the abdomen. Some doctors believe in giving tablets to help, so do ask. Wearing very high-heeled shoes and sitting cross-legged can make cramps worse.

Some women find that it helps to exercise the feet before going to bed – circle the feet at least 10 times in each direction. Try stretching your legs out straight and pulling your toes hard up towards you just before you go to sleep. Another tip is to raise the foot of the bed by placing a pillow under the mattress.

Swollen ankles and varicose veins

Rest – lying down on your side with legs supported in a raised position, then vigorously exercise your feet up and down for at least 30 seconds at a time. Avoid standing for long periods and consider wearing support tights.

Numb fingers

This may be a problem first thing in the morning and is due to extra fluid in the body, increasing pressure at the wrist. The physiotherapist may supply you with wrist supports to wear at night, which may solve the problem.

NB. If swollen ankles and/or fingers are accompanied by puffy face, headaches or flashing lights, seek medical advice at once.

Rib flare

This problem is due to the growing baby pushing the ribs out of their normal position. Try to change position frequently and avoid sitting on low chairs, and other positions which bring your ribs close to your pelvis. You may get temporary relief by lifting the arm on the affected side and bending sideways away from the ache.

Sitting cross-legged (tailor fashion) with hands on head also gives some relief.

Emotional changes

The hormone changes in pregnancy lead to emotional ‘ups and downs’ and sometimes forgetfulness. After the birth, these problems will gradually improve.

Stress, tension and relaxation

Some people feel extremely tired, others develop aches and pains which are not due to specific illness, but are related to tension. Tension causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate and rate of breathing which can lead to feelings of panic. Knowing how to prevent tension is a valuable skill which everyone could use when life is more challenging than usual. Learning a relaxation technique and using it regularly has been shown to reduce mildly increased blood pressure. Women who learn relaxation and use it in labour generally cope better with pain and feel more in control. During pregnancy, practicing relaxation will help you to rest more effectively and can also help you to get back to sleep again if you wake during the night. Try to have a session at least once a day using the positions of comfort learned in your classes.

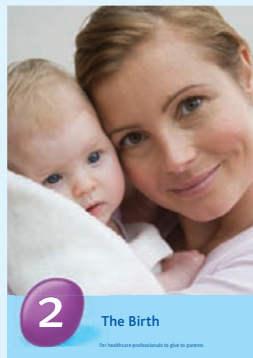
If you are unable to attend classes where relaxation is taught, the following book may help you: *'Simple Relaxation'* by Laura Mitchell, published by John Murray. You could ask for it at your Public Library.

Remember that exercise is the best 'stress buster' of all, a brisk walk with a friend, (so you can stay within the limits of the 'talk test'), is a great way of relieving stress. Enjoy your pregnancy, and remember to contact your Chartered Physiotherapist in Women's Health if you have any queries regarding any of the information in this leaflet.

This is one of a series of leaflets. Others in the series include:

2 The Birth

3 Postnatal Exercises and Advice



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Useful Sites

- www.aptaclub.ie Information about pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- www.mumslikeus.ie A community of breastfeeding mums offering information, real life videos, and interactive tools to help you along your journey.
- www.magicmum.ie Forums on pregnancy, babies and lots more.
- www.cso.ie/en/statistics/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ Central Statistics Office. This site lists the most popular babies' names registered with the CSO.
- www.citizensinformation.ie/categories/birth-family-relationships Information on public services available on a range of childcare issues from adoption, fostering, before and after baby is born, benefits and entitlements relating to birth.
- www.doh.ie Department of Health website provides information on health services available in Ireland and how to avail of these. Check out the maternity and infant section.
- www.rollercoaster.ie For the ups and downs of pregnancy and parenting.
- www.welfare.ie The website of the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Check out maternity and child benefit entitlements.
- www.iscp.ie Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists. Representative body for over 3,000 chartered physiotherapists in Ireland.



Queries on infant nutrition 0-3 years?

Call the Aptacub experts



Call our team FREE
1 800 22 12 34



Email our experts
ask@aptacub.ie

www.aptacub.ie

Important Notice: Breastfeeding is best for your baby, as it is perfectly suited to nourish infants and protect them from illnesses such as ear infections, stomach upsets, diabetes, eczema and obesity. It is important that, in preparation for and during breastfeeding, you eat a healthy, balanced diet. Combined breast and bottlefeeding in the first weeks of life may reduce the supply of your own breastmilk, and reversing the decision not to breastfeed is difficult. The social and financial implications of using an infant milk should be considered. Improper use of an infant milk or inappropriate foods or feeding methods may present a health hazard. If you use an infant milk, you should follow manufacturer's instructions for use carefully – failure to follow the instructions may make your baby ill. Always consult your doctor, midwife or public health nurse for advice about feeding your baby.

Exercises provided by the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists Clinical Interest Group, Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health and Continence.

For further information, see www.iscp.ie or www.physicaltherapy.ie, or contact the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP), Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 402 2148.

The ISCP recommend breastfeeding as being best for baby, and do not endorse any particular product.

