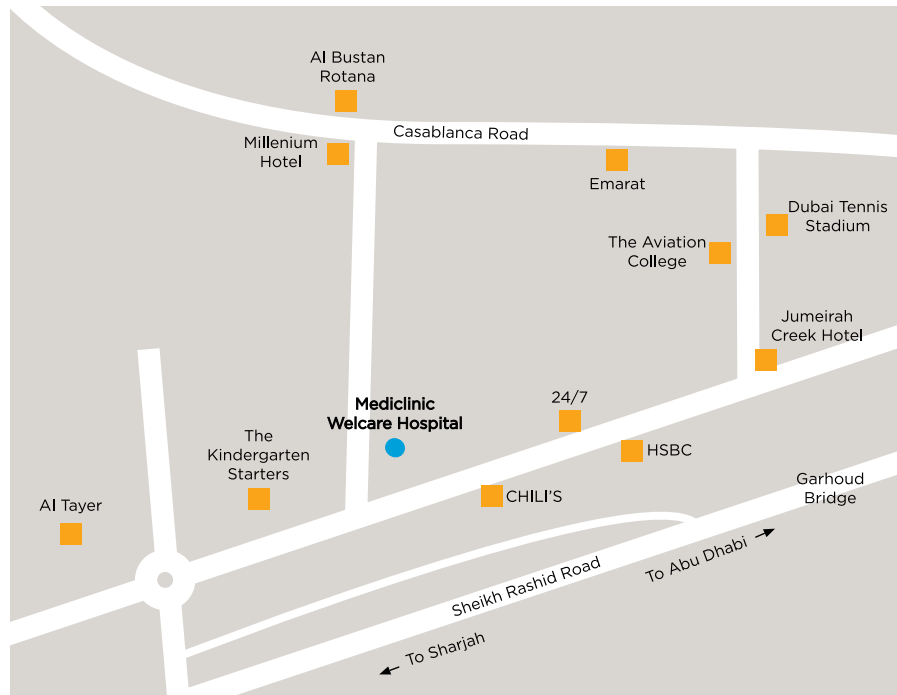


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EXERCISES AND ADVICE FOR AFTER BABY IS BORN



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Your body takes up to three months to recover from childbirth. This booklet provides basic exercises to strengthen those muscles which have been stretched during pregnancy and childbirth, and advice to aid in your recovery. Remember: start gently and progress gradually.

EXERCISES FOR THE FIRST SIX WEEKS

1. CIRCULATORY EXERCISE

What does it do?

It improves the circulation in your legs, and help to reduce swelling in your feet and ankles. It can be done while lying in bed or sitting in a chair.



NB! Avoid crossing your legs or ankles, or standing for prolonged periods.

How to do it?

- Push your feet away from you and pull them back up, quickly. Repeat 10 times
- Move your feet in circles. Repeat 10 times
- Circle your feet around in one direction and then in the other direction
- Lying in bed, on your back, slide your foot on the bed up to your bottom, bending your knee, then slide it back down. One leg at a time. Repeat 10 times

2. BREATHING EXERCISE

What does it do?

Keep your lungs clear and aids in relaxation.

How to do it?

Lie down with your head on a pillow and your knees bent up.

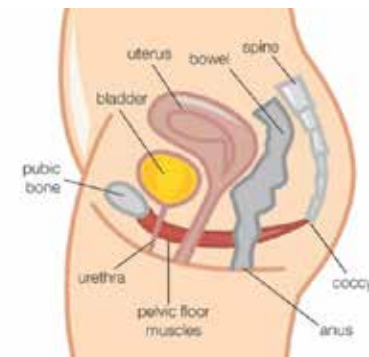
- Place your hands on your tummy
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, and feel your abdomen rise
- Sigh out through your mouth and feel your abdomen sink down
- Repeat five times, three times per day



3. PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISE

What is the pelvic floor and what does it do?

The pelvic floor is a sling of muscle at the base of the pelvis that supports the pelvic organs, helps maintain bladder and bowel control, and maintains healthy sexual function.



During pregnancy, hormones and the growing baby may have a weakening effect on the pelvic floor. This may result in poor bladder and bowel control. Therefore, it is recommended that all women exercise their pelvic floor muscles regularly throughout life, including during pregnancy.

When to start doing it?

If you have a catheter in, start these exercises after it has been removed.

How to do it?

- Begin by lying on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart
- Imagine you are trying to stop your flow of urine, and at the same time trying to hold in wind/ gas. You should feel a 'squeeze and lift', as if closing and drawing up the front and back passages. This is a pelvic floor contraction
- **Long holds:** Try to hold this squeeze and lift for three seconds then relax completely. Repeat three times. Breathe normally whilst doing these exercises. Relax for four seconds between each contraction
- **Quick squeezes:** Now do fast, strong pelvic floor contractions holding each squeeze and lift for only one second. Repeat three times. This is necessary for retraining the muscle to contract quickly when you cough, laugh or sneeze
- With practice, your muscle strength will improve
- As you are able, gradually build up the holds and repetitions until you can hold for 10 seconds, 10 times
- Repeat this exercise three times per day
- Once you are trained and comfortable in doing these exercises, you can do it sitting or standing

NB! Doing the exercises correctly

Ensure that you are ONLY exercising the pelvic floor muscles, and that you are not:

- Holding your breath
- Tightening your buttocks
- Squeezing your legs together
- Pulling in your tummy muscles too much

4. ABDOMINAL MUSCLES

What do they do?

The abdominal muscles form a natural corset supporting your back and internal organs. These muscles have been stretched and separated (the front abdominal muscles) to allow for growth of your baby. This separation or “gap” needs to close (usually by four to six weeks) before your back will be properly supported again.

Checking for the “gap”

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Use one hand to support your head whilst you press the fingers of the other hand deep across the middle of your abdomen above your belly button. Gently raise your head and shoulders off the bed towards a low sit-up to generate some tension in the muscle. You may feel a gap between the muscle wall edges.

Sit-ups are not recommended until this “gap” has either closed or has reduced to at least two finger widths and you can contract and hold your pelvic floor muscles during a sit-up.

The following gentle exercises will help to strengthen your abdominal muscles, regain your shape, prevent or relieve backache and bring this gap together.

4.1 CORE

- On your back, bend your knees and place your hands below your belly button
- Breathe in through your nose
- And as you breathe out, pull your lower tummy towards your back
- As you feel the muscles tighten try to hold for a count of three, and then relax
- Repeat as often as possible
- You will gradually be able to hold for a count of 10 and repeat 10 times



4.2 PELVIC TILTING

- Tighten pelvic floor and abdominal muscles as in 4.1
- Squeeze your buttocks together then flatten your lower back into the floor
- Hold for two to three seconds and repeat five times while breathing normally
- These exercises should be done regularly. Increase to 10 repetitions and the hold to 10 seconds



4.3 CROSS OVER (begin after one week)

Keeping your head and feet relaxed on the bed (do not lift)

- Gently press your right hand against your left leg, whilst pushing your left leg against your right hand
- Hold for five seconds then relax
- Repeat five times
- Repeat with other arm and leg
- Do one to three sets each day
- Alternatively this exercise can be done while sitting



5. BACK EXERCISES

5.1 CAT

- Kneel on hands and knees keeping back straight
- As you breathe out, drop head and gently round lower back, stretching it up as you do a pelvic floor contraction and pull your lower abdomen in towards your spine
- Relax slowly to return to starting position as you breathe in
- DO NOT allow your back to hollow down



5.2 PELVIC ROLL

- Lie on your back with knees bent and together
- Do a pelvic floor contraction then gently pull your lower abdominal muscles in towards your spine, and hold
- Slowly lower your knees to the right. Return to the starting position. Repeat to left
- Breathe normally during this exercise



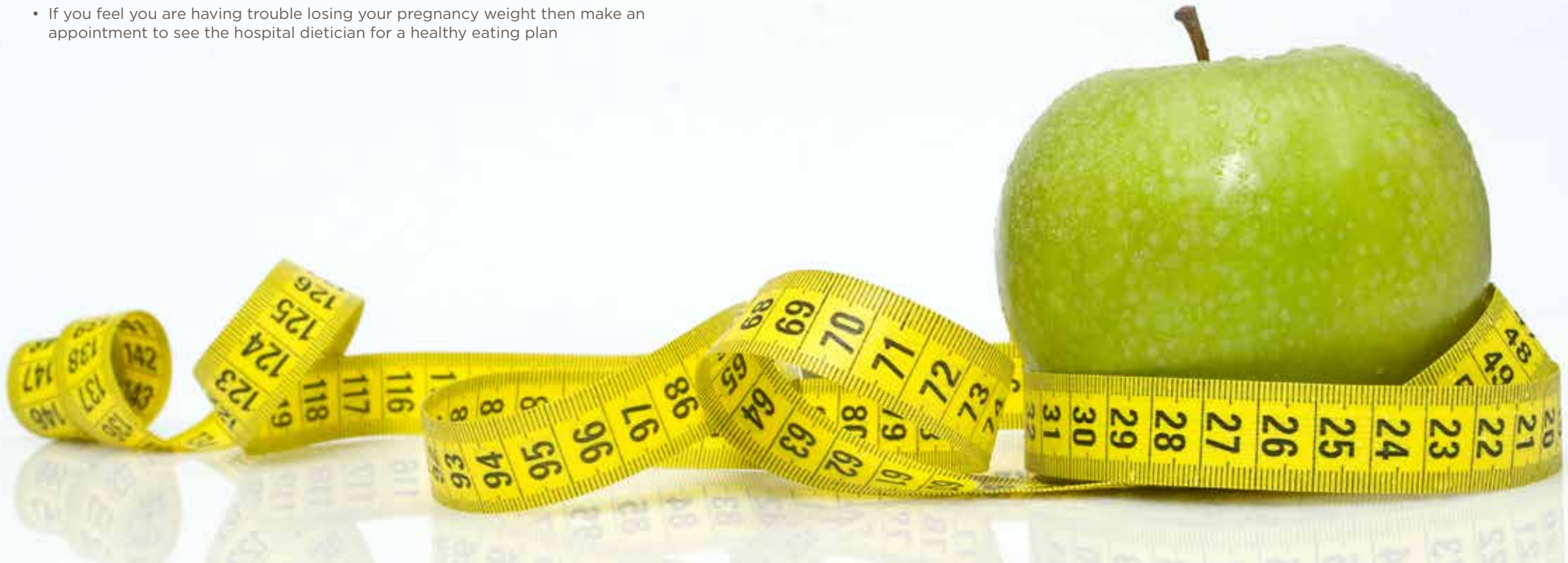
RETURN TO EXERCISE

- Walking is a safe exercise to gain fitness and stamina
- Start with five to 10 minutes a day. Gradually increase as you feel your body is able
- Aim for a minimum of 30 minutes exercise five days a week
- Swimming can be started from six weeks (if no blood loss). Avoid breaststroke if you feel back or pubic pain
- Cycling can be started as soon as it is comfortable to sit on the bicycle seat
- Be careful returning to weight work at the gym, and more strenuous exercise such as Pilates or yoga (except for classes specifically designed for women after giving birth). Returning to the gym should be a gradual process. Start slowly and only progress as your body feels able. At a minimum your abdominal muscle “gap” should be closed and your pelvic floor strength back to normal
- High impact exercise such as jogging, jumping and aerobics should be avoided for at least three months
- If you feel you are having trouble losing your pregnancy weight then make an appointment to see the hospital dietician for a healthy eating plan

EIGHT TO 12 WEEKS AFTER THE BIRTH OF YOUR BABY

- Check again to see if the “gap” in your abdominal muscles has closed. If not or you are not sure, it should be checked by your doctor, midwife or physiotherapist
- It is now a good time to check to see how strong your pelvic floor muscles are by trying to stop the flow of urine midstream. You should be able to either completely or almost stop the flow of urine. Remember this is a test only; do not do your exercises this way
- Also try a stress test – with a reasonably full bladder do 20 jumps (legs slightly apart), four star jumps and three strong coughs. If you are dry you can gradually return to sporting activities but be guided by your own body
- Remember it may take three to four months for your pelvic floor muscles to regain their strength so continue your daily exercises and check again. If you are still concerned then it is important that you talk to your doctor or physiotherapist

Once you feel your pelvic floor muscles are back to normal then ensure you maintain their strength (**remember “use it or lose it”!**)



ADVICE

1. CARE OF YOUR STITCHES

The following will help ease the discomfort you are feeling and aid the healing of your stitches:

- When passing urine it may sting, so use a jug of water to dilute the urine as you are voiding. Always clean from FRONT TO BACK
- Lie down and place a pillow under your hips. Elevating your hips helps reduce the swelling. Also, using an ice pack for 15 minutes every four hours will help to further reduce the swelling
- When opening your bowels use a small wad of tissue to provide support to your stitches and give you more confidence. Do not delay going to the toilet once you have an “urge” as it will only become more difficult. Remember to have enough fluids and a healthy diet to avoid constipation
- Do not use ring cushions as these can make the swelling worse

2. PROTECTING YOUR PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

Contracting your pelvic floor muscles should be a lifelong habit. Gently pull in your lower belly muscles and hold while you bend, lift, carry heavy objects, cough, sneeze, lift weights, do sit-ups etc. Make sure that you breathe normally.

Correct position for opening your bowels

Pushing down as you try to use your bowels will weaken your pelvic floor muscles.

- Place your knees higher than your hips
- Lean forwards and put elbows on your knees

Avoid constipation by:

- Drinking two litres of fluid daily, three litres if breastfeeding
- Eating a balanced diet high in fibre, fresh fruit and vegetables



3. PREVENTING BACKACHE AND MUSCLE STRAIN

It is very important to take care of your back for the next four to six months, as at it is at risk of injury.

CAUSES:

Backache is usually due to weak abdominal muscles, poor posture, tiredness or bad working positions. This can be aggravated by hormonal changes, which make your joints more relaxed and vulnerable to discomfort and pain.

If you have had an epidural it is common to have some back pain, for up to two weeks, around the site where it was inserted.

PREVENTION:

- Exercise and proper posture
- Carrying (light) loads evenly in both hands
- Not carrying children (other than your newborn) on your hip, for any length of time



Standing posture:

Standing 'tall' with your lower abdominal muscles pulled in and your bottom tucked in.

Feeding posture:

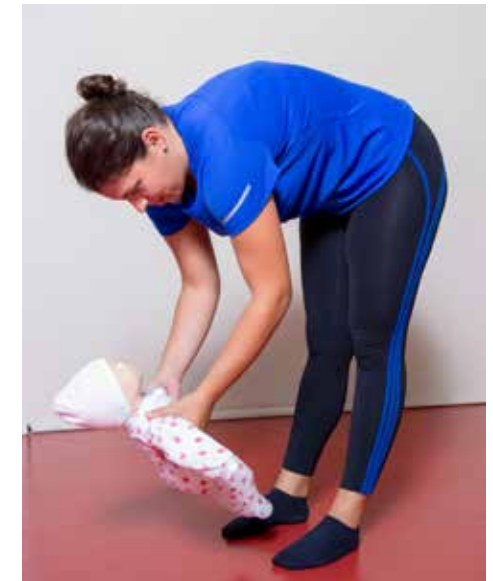
Sitting in a chair with good back support; shoulders and neck relaxed, and your arm supported on a pillow.

**Correct****Wrong**

After feeds, roll your shoulders backwards to ease upper back and neck tension. Then tilt your left ear to your left shoulder to gently stretch the right side of your neck, hold 20 seconds, relax and then repeat opposite side.

Lifting:

- Avoid heavy lifting for at least six weeks
- Hold the object close to your body and contract your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles, before lifting
- Lift bending your knees and keeping your back straight

**Correct****Wrong**

- Avoiding twisting movements; turn your feet in the direction of movement
- Avoid prolonged bending, especially when changing and bathing baby. Make sure the surface you are working on is at waist height
- Abdominal binders:
It is important, from day one, to use your lower abdominal and back muscles to support your back rather than wearing a "binder". However, binders can be useful if you feel your tummy muscles have been over stretched or you have a large 'gap' in the abdominal muscles. It may assist you to do the exercises more effectively rather than replacing the exercise.