



# National Maternity Hospital

Vita Gloriosa Vita ~ Life Glorious Life

## Physiotherapy Department – Advice and Exercise for Caesarean Section

Following your delivery it is important you allow your body some rest in order to recover. Remember, because you have had an abdominal operation you may be more tired. Do not expect too much too soon. Be kind to yourself. Listen to your body, do not push yourself. Accept offers of help from friends and family.

Most of your body's changes will return to normal automatically over time. Your uterus will have reduced in size by 6-8 weeks and your ligaments will have gotten stronger by 5 months. However there are some effects of your pregnancy that need a little extra attention, time and effort to return to full strength and function.

You may feel discomfort around the incision site and may find it sore to move around. Speak with the midwife looking after you if you feel your pain is not well controlled.

### Early Days: Moving to get out of bed:

Trying to sit up from lying and lowering yourself back is likely to be uncomfortable.

- Bend your up knees.
- Turn your head in the direction you want to roll and bring your arm across your body.
- Moving the shoulders and hips together and roll on to your side.
- Move your legs off the edge of the bed
- Push yourself up sideways on your elbow, supporting your stomach with the other hand if needed.
- Do the reverse to get back into bed: Sit on the edge of the bed, lie onto your side, bring your legs onto the bed and roll yourself onto your back.



**Short frequent walks** are good for circulation and for preventing discomfort and pain. Try to take a few short walks along the postnatal ward. When walking, try to stand up straight. Try changing position regularly to prevent stiffness.

**Chest care:** Take two or three deep breaths hourly to allow full lung expansion. When coughing, sneezing or laughing, bend your knees and support your incision with your hands to prevent pain. Using a folded towel or pillow may also provide additional comfort.

**Swelling:** If your ankles are swollen do some exercises to promote blood circulation hourly by bending your feet up and down for 30 seconds. Elevate your feet regularly.

**Bladder care:** It is important to go to the toilet regularly once your catheter has been removed. If you have any issues emptying your bladder, getting to the toilet on time or passing good volumes of urine after your delivery, please inform your midwife or physiotherapist.

**Abdominal Supports:** Some women may find a breathable tummy support such as tubigrip may provide comfort in the early days post delivery

**Shoulder Tip Pain:** It is not uncommon to feel pain in the shoulder after any abdominal surgery. This is generally caused by referred pain from your diaphragm and should settle after a few days. Heat may help to ease this pain or you can ask your midwife for some peppermint water. Be mindful of your posture and take a few gentle walks along the corridor.

**Trapped Wind:** Some people experience discomfort in their stomach or shoulders from trapped wind.

The following may help:

- Massaging your stomach gently in a clockwise direction, support your stitches with the other hand.
- Lie on the bed with knees bent up and feet on the bed; roll your knees gently from side to side, in a comfortable range as your wound will allow.
- Walking and moving little and often.
- Ask your midwife for some peppermint water.

**Constipation:** A lot of women find that they are constipated initially following the surgery.

The following tips may help you deal with constipation:

- Try to drink at least 1-2 litres fluid daily.
- Try not to miss meals. Eat breakfast straight away after getting up to allow your digestive system time to work before you leave the house.
- Don't delay going to the loo once you have the urge to empty your bowels
- Don't rush give yourself time to go
- Exercise helps to stimulate digestion e.g. walking

- Ask your doctor about any medications you are prescribed. Some may be causing constipation, so you may need to make allowances for this.
- Avoid relying on laxatives; use for short term only.



### Passing a Bowel Movement in 4 Easy Steps

1. Sit down on toilet. Using a footstool (or two phonebooks), lean forward with feet apart and forearms on thighs. Keep the back straight (see diagram). This position helps to relax the muscles in the pelvic floor, which is important for easy emptying.
2. Practice breathing exercises feeling tummy swell out as you inhale and pelvic floor drop down and relax. Imagine a big beach ball filling up with air. Your tummy is the front of the ball and the pelvic floor is the bottom
3. Focus on releasing the pelvic floor; imagine an elevator, starting at ground level, draw the muscles up a little (level 1), then up a little more (level 2), up a little more (level 3), then slowly relax down to level 2, down to level 1, down to ground floor, down again to basement and imagine the doors opening.
4. When you feel ready to push, bring chin to chest, lean forward a little and push down.  
Try to keep the tummy swelled out against your upper thighs throughout. Practise by saying the word 'OOooch' feeling the sensation of the tummy swelling out and pressure downwards into the back passage.

*Take your and time and relax, don't rush the process.*

### Exercising your pelvic floor muscles

It is important to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles even after a caesarean section. Pregnancy can put a lot of pressure on your pelvic floor. These muscles are important to prevent leaking both postnatally and also later in life.

Before you start it is important that you can firstly squeeze and tighten the muscle and then **let go completely**. Practice this first, without holding, without counting; simply feel the muscle working and then relaxing. Once you can get the hang of this you can move on.

Gently squeeze shut your back passage (as if holding back wind), your vagina (as if gripping a tampon) and your urethra (as if stopping your flow of urine) and draw your pelvic floor inwards and upwards. Do this without tightening your buttocks, without holding your breath and without squeezing your legs together

- Your aim is to be able to do 10 holds of 10 seconds each and 10 fast contractions.
- Begin by finding out how long you can hold the contraction for and how many you can repeat at each session and gradually build up to the '**magnificent 10**'.
- It is important that you keep breathing naturally whilst doing the exercises
- Make sure to give yourself time in between each exercise to **let go** of the pelvic floor muscles completely

### **Sexual Intercourse**

It is preferable to wait six weeks until your GP/Consultant check up to ensure your stitches are fully healed.

Remember with hormonal changes, lack of sleep and a new baby you may not feel like you are ready at 6 weeks. Resume intercourse when you feel ready and understand that this may take time.

Be patient with yourself and open with your partner about how you feel.

You are the best person to know when your body has fully recovered and you feel emotionally and physically ready to resume sexual relations.

Find a position most comfortable for you, use plenty of lubrication and start gently. If you have any concerns about physical or emotional issues which prevent you resuming normal sexual relations with you partner or if you have persistent discomfort or pain with intercourse discuss this with your GP/Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Postnatally you can contact the physiotherapy department (01-6373499) if you have concerns regarding your pelvic floor.

### **Going Home:**

Remember that you have had an operation and it will take time for you to heal, so increase your level of activity gradually as you feel able to. You may feel very tired when you go home, so don't overdo it, pace yourself and limit your visitors.

**Allow yourself time to rest and recover.** It might be helpful to try and sleep when your baby sleeps. It is important to take good care of your back whilst looking after your baby. Try to stand up straight as much as possible. Don't walk into your wound!

**Wound/scar management:** Massage is used to desensitize, break up tissue fibres, relieve itching, stretch the scar and move excessive fluid. Unless otherwise advised, once your wound has healed you can begin gentle scar tissue massage.

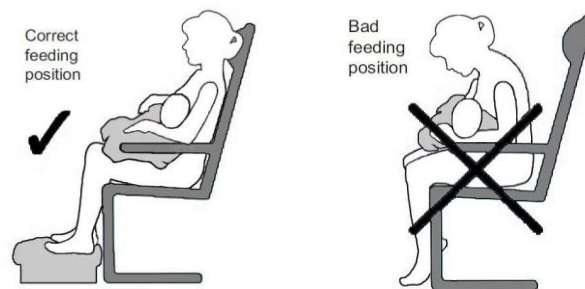
- Lie flat on your back allowing your muscles to relax.
- Gently massage a non-perfumed moisturiser into your scar two to three times a day to hydrate the skin and make it supple.

## Looking After Your Back

It is important that you take care of yourself and your back in the weeks following delivery. Being a new mum means there are lots of things to lift and carry and you need a strong back to protect yourself against injury. This area is vulnerable for 5-6 months after delivery. Starting with good habits for simple tasks like feeding, changing and lifting toddlers can help to prevent back pain. Always remember it is much easier to prevent pain than to treat it.

### Feeding:

- Sit in a comfortable chair with your back well supported.
- A chair with arms may provide you with more support.
- Place pillows on your lap to bring the baby up to the level of your breasts/bottle to avoid slouching.
- Try to rest back when you're feeding and relax your shoulders.
- Lying on your side can also be a comfortable position for feeding.

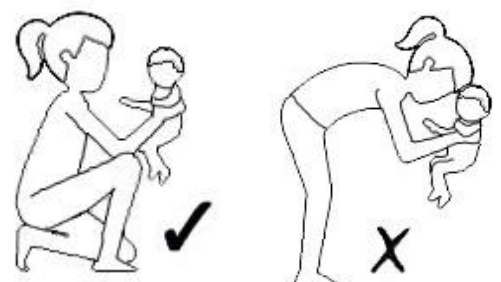


### Changing and bathing:

- Adapt working surfaces to waist height to prevent you from stooping over and developing backache, e.g. changing tables.
- Bathe your baby on a surface at the right height for you.
- It will be easier to lift your baby from this height.

### Lifting:

- To lift, pull in your stomach and pelvic floor muscles, bend from the knees and keep your back straight.
- Keep your baby close to your body as you lift up.
- You can lift and carry your baby, but try to avoid lifting anything heavier during the first 6 weeks.
- Accept help from others
- Avoid picking up younger children/toddlers; rather encourage them to climb up to you while you are sitting.



**Housework:**

- Avoid activities that cause strain to your abdomen and pelvic floor during the first few weeks, e.g. prolonged standing.
- Accept offers of help with housework
- In the first 6 weeks avoid hoovering and heavy lifting, e.g. a basket of wet washing.

**Driving:**

- You are normally allowed to return to driving at 6 weeks, check with your GP/doctor
- You will need to inform your insurance company that you have had an operation.
- Before the first journey check- Do you feel comfortable to drive? Can you concentrate? Can you do an emergency stop without any pain?
- Put a pillow between the seat belt and your stomach for comfort on car journeys.

**Returning to Activity**

Exercise has many positive effects on both your physical and emotional wellbeing postnatally. Try to build a little exercise in to your day from soon after you bring your baby home. Start slowly and listen to your body.

- Walking is the safest and easiest type of exercise to start after delivery. Start slowly and build up speed and distance gradually
- It is safe to swim again once any wounds have healed and all vaginal loss has ceased. This may be following your six week check-up
- Low impact exercise is safe to resume after approximately 6-8 weeks, for example: Pilates and yoga
- High impact exercise such as aerobics, running, and resistance/weight training can generally be resumed gradually no sooner 12 weeks but some people will take a little longer.

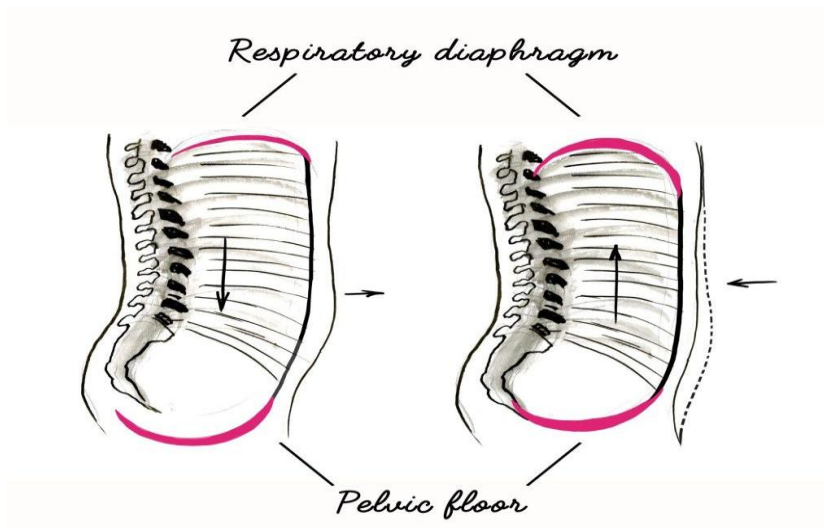
Try to be in tune with your body, if any exercise feels uncomfortable or painful or if you are experiencing any leaking, don't continue and seek advice from a healthcare professional.

**Diaphragmatic Breathing**

Correct breathing lays the foundation for healing and strengthening through your 'core'. Being able to "just breathe" in the early postnatal days you begin the healing process by rehabbing the deep abdominals, the diaphragm and the pelvic floor. It allows you to build the core foundation you need for daily movements with your baby and to prepare your body for returning to exercise.

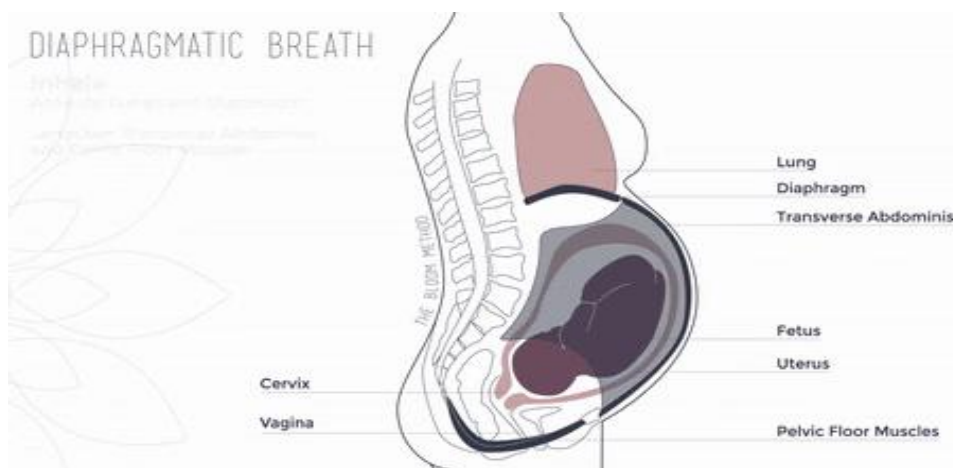
The diaphragm is the muscle that sits just below your lungs. It helps to think of your abdomen like a cylinder. Your pelvic floor makes up the bottom of the cylinder, your diaphragm is the top of the cylinder and your tummy and back muscles will make up the walls of the cylinder. In order for diastasis recovery we need to ensure all elements of this 'core cylinder' are co-ordinated.

So whether you are trying to heal diastasis recti initially after pregnancy, want to strengthen and return to activity or are looking to rehab your pelvic floor muscles the process starts with the breath. Think of this simple form of breath as the foundations needed to build a strong core. This is why it is one of the most important exercises a mother can start after carrying and delivering a baby.



### What is diaphragmatic breathing?

- Sit comfortably with one hand on your chest and one on your belly
- Become aware of your breath, imagine your diaphragm muscle moving up and down as you breathe
- When you inhale, your belly will rise and expand as your lungs fill with air and your diaphragm moves down to accommodate your full lungs. Your pelvic floor mimics the movement of your diaphragm. As the diaphragm moves down, the pelvic lets go of tension and relaxes. Draw your attention to your perineum and back passage and direct your 'letting go' to this area
- As you exhale, feel your belly fall and contract as your diaphragm moves back upward and the pelvic floor switches on and begins to rise. As you exhale try to incorporate a pelvic floor 'lift' and gently engage your deep tummy muscles.
- Repeat this process of deep inhalation and exhalation for 10-15 breaths



## What are the benefits of diaphragmatic breathing?

Aside from providing functional strength, some of the other benefits of diaphragmatic breathing are:

- Helping to reduce stress and anxiety by tapping into our parasympathetic nervous system. You can use your breath almost as a form of meditation (Think about relaxed breathing as you slowly inhale and exhale)
- Providing a level of holistic healing in assisting with the re-aligning of your organs back into their pre-pregnancy positions
- Helping with overall healing and treatment of pregnant related conditions such as diastasis recti, incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse
- Allowing you and your baby to connect in an extremely calming environment

Diaphragmatic breathing sets the foundation for true core function, healing and strength.

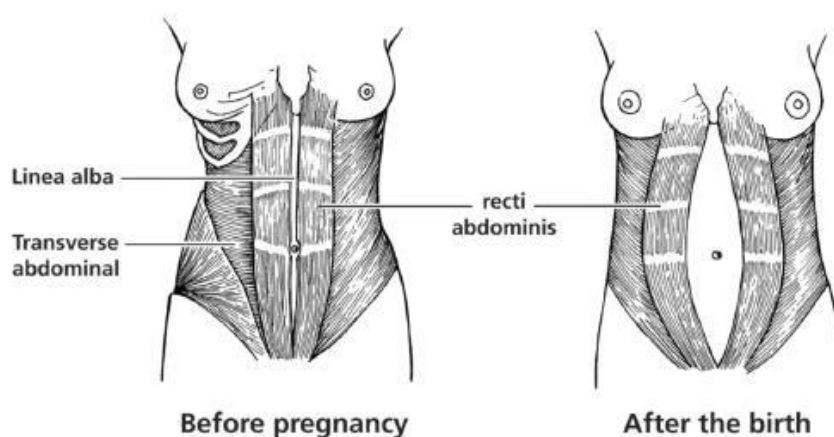
So try to "just breathe" in the days or weeks following your birth. Enjoy the early days with your baby and trust that something as simple as your breath can bring about foundational results that will keep you strong and moving well for life.

## Tummy muscles

Your abdominal muscles help to support your back, maintain good posture and help with bowel and bladder function your bladder and bowel.

### Separation of your stomach muscles:

A diastasis recti is simply the name given to the stretch of your tummy muscles during pregnancy. Diastasis is a very normal and natural process during pregnancy and happens to almost all pregnant women. It is amazing what your body has achieved to accommodate your growing baby





Some amount of natural healing will take place in the next 6-8 weeks so it is important to be patient with yourself and your rehab. Make sure to eat well as a healthy diet can assist in promoting healing of a diastasis. You can start to do some gentle exercise in these early weeks (see below). Be mindful of any exercise or activity which causes a bulging of the lower tummy, as this may be putting pressure on the diastasis as it tries to heal.

Try to sit in well supported postures, particularly when feeding your baby. Use a pillow to support the weight of your baby and take pressure off your back as you feed. Remember what's good for your back is also good for your tummy muscles and we often forget about our own postures as we try to establish feeding with baby in those early days.

### **To check your muscles**

This is a rough guide to check only the width of a diastasis. When measuring a diastasis we consider not only the width but also the depth of the gap and how well you recruit all the muscles working around it. Your pelvic health physiotherapist can check this for you.

- Lie on your back with knees bent up, feet flat on the bed.
- Place the fingers of one hand just above your belly button, palm facing you, press gently into your tummy.
- Pull in your stomach muscles and lift your head up, like a mini sit-up.
- You should feel two bands of muscle either side of your fingers tighten. Test how many fingers you can get between the bands of muscle.
- If this gap is more than 3 fingers wide you should be followed up by your Physiotherapist

### **Help to protect your tummy muscles!**

- Avoid 'sit-up' type manoeuvres in the early days – especially when getting in and out of bed. Sit on the edge of the bed, lower yourself down onto your side then roll over onto your back. When getting up, roll onto your side first, then push up into sitting and then stand up.
- Correct movement or loading of your tummy is important. A women's health physio or qualified postnatal trainer can guide you to begin increasing the load through the abdominals to try to reduce the 'gap'
- Be careful with lifting, avoid it where possible! Always bend your knees and keep your back straight. Pull in your tummy and pelvic floor before you lift.
- Remember your posture when you are feeding. Sit out in a chair if possible and use pillows to prop you up and support your back. Breast feeding pillows are excellent to help bring baby up to you so your muscles do not tire whilst trying to hold baby for the duration of the feed.
- Also try feeding whilst lying on your side in bed, again using pillows (perhaps between the legs or behind the back) to support you.
- Strengthen your deep abdominal muscles with the exercises below

**Do not be afraid of exercise and activity because of your diastasis. Think of all the movements you do on a daily basis. Normal movement is important for function.**

Your abdominal muscles help to support your back, maintain good posture and help with bowel and bladder function your bladder and bowel.

The following exercises will help strengthen and tone your abdominal muscles. These exercises should feel comfortable and pain free. Start with 5 repetitions and gradually increase as these become easier. If you like you can start with exercise one and week by week add in a new exercise as you work through the programme

*Please attend postnatal physiotherapy classes as detailed if unsure of any exercise.*

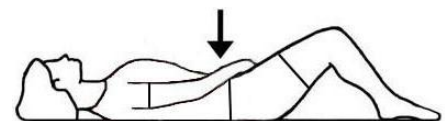
### **Exercise 1: Deep abdominal muscles**

- Lay on your back with your knees bent and head supported.
- Place your hands on your stomach below your belly button.
- Breathe in through your nose, and as you breathe out draw your stomach in away from your hands towards your spine.
- Keep your stomach pulled in and hold
- Progress to do this exercise in sitting and standing.

*Use these deep abdominal muscles when doing activities that require effort such as lifting your baby*

### **Exercise 2: Pelvic Tilt**

- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Pull in your stomach, tighten your pelvic floor muscles and tilt your pelvis by gently flattening your back into the bed.
- Hold for 3- 5 seconds breathing normally, then relax.
- Progress by trying different positions such as sitting, standing, side lying.



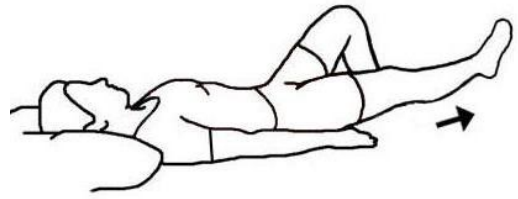
### **Exercise 3: Knee Rolling**

- Lie on your back with your knees bent. Gently pull in your lower abdominals (see exercise 1)
- Inhale to prepare and as you exhale gently roll your two knees to the left side
- Inhale to come back to the centre
- Exhale to roll the knees down to the opposite side.



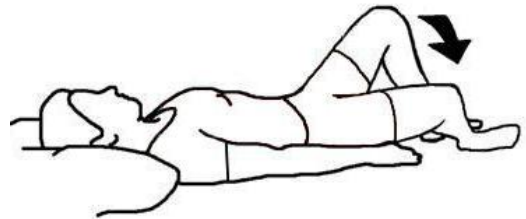
#### Exercise 4: Leg slides

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Gently slide one leg out straight and return.
- Repeat with other leg.



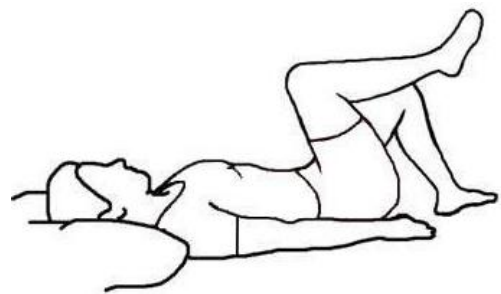
#### Exercise 5: Single knee fall out

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Keeping your pelvis still and stomach pulled in, allow one knee to slowly drop out to the side.
- Slowly bring your knee back to the middle.
- Repeat with the other leg.



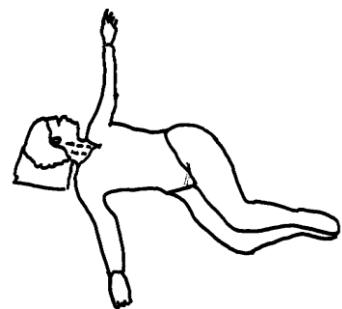
#### Exercise 6: Knee bends

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Slowly lift one leg up off the bed keeping your knee bent. Hold for 10 seconds, then slowly return to the starting position
- Repeat with the other leg.



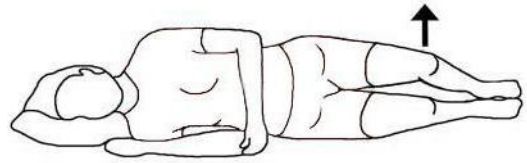
#### Exercise 7: Arm Opening

- Lying on your side.
- Breathe in and reach the upper arm forward and up.
- Breathe out as you bring the arm back and over behind your back.
- Pause for a second, breathe in and bring the arm up and forward, breathing out as you return to the starting position
- Do not force it. Follow your hand with your eyes.



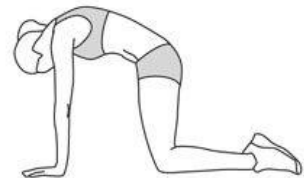
### Exercise 8: Clam

- Lie on your side with knees bent and feet together, pull in your stomach and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
- Lift your top leg moving your knees apart but keeping your feet together, keep your pelvis still throughout
- Slowly return to the starting position.
- Repeat with the other leg.



### Exercise 9: Cat and Cow stretch

- Kneeling on all fours, hand under your shoulders and knees under your hips
- Inhale to prepare
- As you exhale engage your lower abdominal muscles and arch your back up towards the ceiling with your tailbone and head down. Try to stretch out any areas of the spine that are stiff
- Press your hands in to the floor and feel the stretch extend in to your upper back and shoulder blades
- Slowly return to start position



### Exercise 10: Child's Pose

- Kneeling on all 4s
- Bring bum back to heels
- Walk hands out in front until you feel a comfortable stretch in your lower back
- Hold for 30s as you breathe deep and soften into your belly



Please see below a link to our YouTube videos which correlate to the exercises in this leaflet:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLttO1pYTORo0K6jWQpJHpJPKwwfl82dG->

### Postnatal Physiotherapy Classes

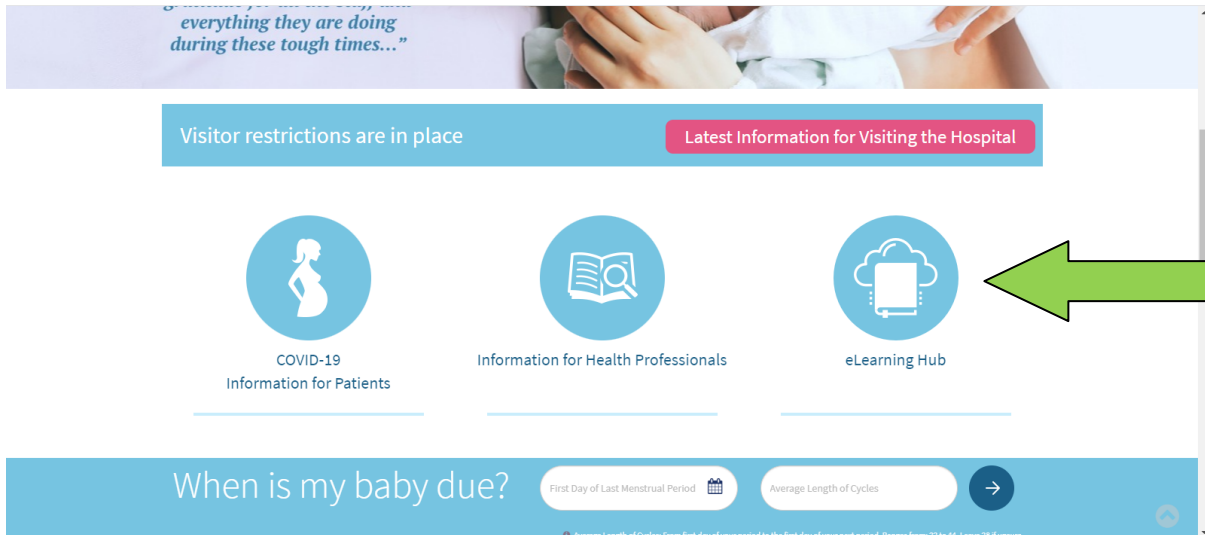
We are currently running a weekly 'Healthy Bodies After Birth' class for postnatal women. This will be held online. You are welcome to attend up to three months postnatally.

To secure a link please email:

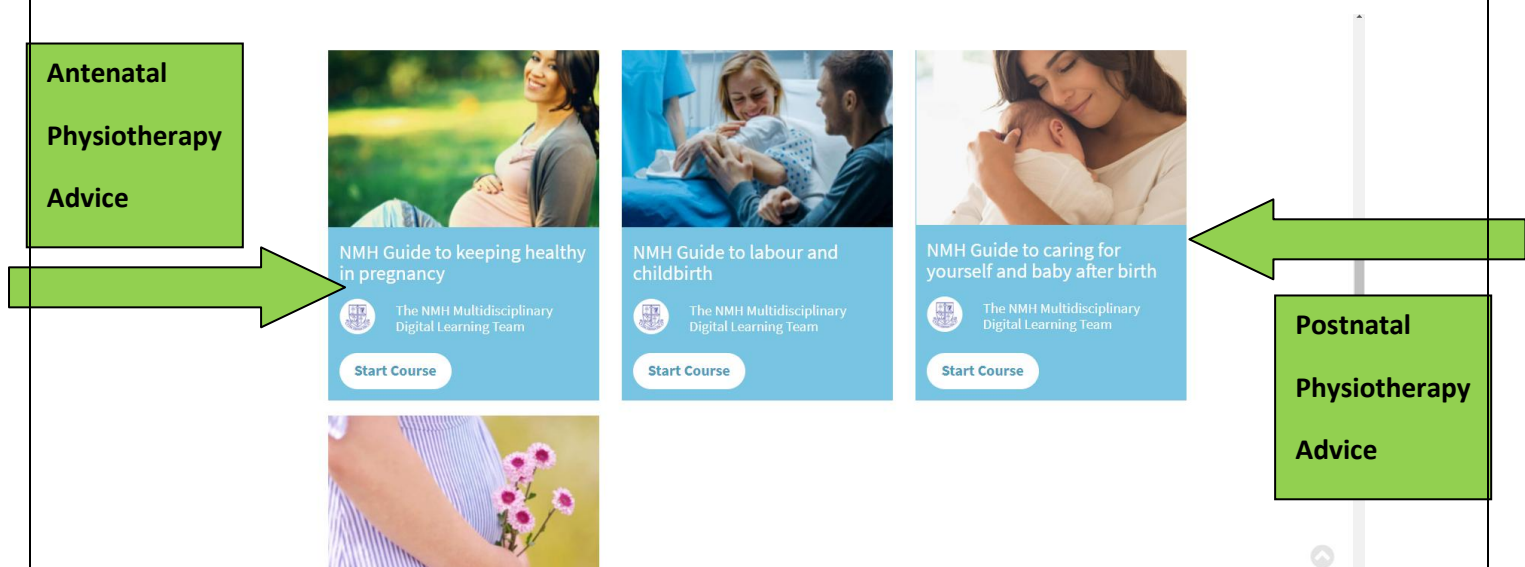
[njordan@nmh.ie](mailto:njordan@nmh.ie)

# How to Access NMH Physiotherapy Information online

1. Visit [www.nmh.ie](http://www.nmh.ie)
2. Scroll down until you see the *eLearning Hub*



3. Select your required module



## For Antenatal Physiotherapy advice:

**Physiotherapy  
Advice**



and created a series of educational modules for women delivered via a new virtual classroom.

This information will be updated over time so please keep checking back to look at it again. We hope you find this helpful and please let us know what you think by sending a message to [feedback@nmh.ie](mailto:feedback@nmh.ie).

- Caring for you and your baby in pregnancy
- Physical activity
- Eating well in pregnancy
- Smoking and alcohol during pregnancy
- Medications and pregnancy
- Minding your mental health
- Medical social work support

## For Postnatal advice:

**Advice for the  
initial days  
after delivery**



checking back to look at it again.

- LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF IN THE POST NATAL PERIOD
- New beginnings
  - The post natal ward
  - Common concerns
  - Recovery after a caesarean section
  - Going home with your new baby
- LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF AT HOME AFTER CHILDBIRTH
- Adjusting to parenthood
  - Post natal depression
  - Eating well
  - More information on minding yourself after childbirth
  - When to seek help
  - Sex and contraception after childbirth
- KEEPING YOURSELF HEALTHY WITH EXERCISE
- Restarting exercise after childbirth
  - Breathing exercises to strengthen your core
  - Pelvic floor exercises
  - Abdominal exercises
  - Looking after your back
- GUIDE TO FEEDING YOUR BABY
- Feeding basics
  - Winding your baby
  - How to recognise that your baby is getting enough milk
- BREASTFEEDING



**Advice for the  
long term  
recovery and  
return to activity  
and exercise**