



National Maternity Hospital

Vita Gloriosa Vita ~ Life Glorious Life

Physiotherapy Department – Advice and Exercise following Assisted Vaginal Delivery

Following your delivery it is important you allow your body some rest in order to recover. Listen to your body, do not push yourself. Do not expect too much too soon, be kind to 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 perineum 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.

Care for Your Perineum with Stitches

Your pelvic floor muscles can be injured during childbirth. Some women tear naturally while others have an episiotomy. Even if you have not received stitches, you may experience some soreness or pain around your perineum. Swelling around the perineum and vagina is common with any vaginal delivery but especially with a vacuum or forceps delivery, you are likely to experience a little more swelling down below.

Pain relief will help to relieve this. If the pain gets worse, or if you have an unpleasant discharge, ask your midwife, public health nurse or GP to check for signs of poor healing or infection. Redness may be a sign of infection.

‘Cold therapy’ such as ice packs or gel packs can relieve pain, swelling and ease discomfort. If cold therapy is used in the first 2 to 3 days it should be applied for just 10 minutes and no more frequently than 2 hourly. It is very important that the ice pack does not come into contact with your skin as this could cause a painful ice burn. You should wrap the ice in a wet towel or facecloth and apply it to the perineum to reduce tissue swelling and pain. It can be useful to pop a few maternity pads soaked in water in the freezer, as they are thin they work well and are comfortable to sit on (still make sure to wrap these in a cloth and not place directly on the sensitive healing skin)

Change your pads regularly to reduce the risk of infection. Ensure your stitches are clean after going to the toilet. Always pat or blot the area dry, never rub. Shower regularly to keep the area clean. Avoid perfumed products such as shower gels, bath salts, bubble bath, creams or talcum powder. Do not use herbal or aromatherapy remedies without consulting a qualified therapist or your doctor

Bladder Care

Sometimes after childbirth the signals from the bladder can be temporarily interrupted. You might be busy looking after your baby and may forget to go to the bathroom. Sometimes the first sign of a problem can be a large leak of urine upon getting out of bed – this happens because the bladder has become too full - although you haven’t felt like you needed to go - and essentially it over flows when you stand up.

This type of leakage can be very upsetting but it is temporary. It is important that you don’t allow the bladder to overstretch on a regular basis, follow the advice below to look after the bladder and allow it to recover post delivery.

- Sit down and relax (don’t hover) to pass urine about every 2 hours during the day – set a reminder if necessary or at least be sure to go each time you feed your baby.
- Practice the ‘double void technique’ - When you finish passing urine lean forward and press into your lower tummy. Stand up and sit down again and see if any more urine comes. These techniques ensure that you have emptied your bladder fully
- Drink to thirst at least 1.5-2litres per day, avoid fizzy and caffeinated drinks

- Avoid constipation
- Practise pelvic floor exercises about 4 times per day to strengthen the muscles which support the bladder as well as helping to reduce swelling and improve sensation. If feeding is going well, you can use feeding your baby as a cue to remember to do your pelvic floor exercises.

Over time the normal sensation of bladder filling will return and you can begin to go when the bladder feels full rather than on the clock.

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.

Trapped Wind: Some women experience discomfort in their stomach from trapped wind.

The following may help:

- Massaging your stomach gently in a clockwise direction
- 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
- Walking and moving little and often.
- Ask your midwife for some peppermint water.

Bowel Care

A lot of women find that they are anxious to pass their first bowel movement after a vaginal delivery but there is no need to be. These simple steps can help:

- 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
- Sit in a comfortable position, which allows the pelvic floor to relax (see above)
- If you feel a pressure from the back passage, it can help to apply a little counter-pressure with a folded maternity pad at the front, over the clitoris
- 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.

Recovery for Your Pelvic Floor Muscles

It is especially important for you to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles after an assisted delivery. Pregnancy can put a lot of pressure on your pelvic floor. These muscles are important to prevent leaking both now postnatally and also later in life. Remember your pelvic floor can be weak and struggling but yet not be symptomatic of leaking or discomfort so even if you are not having issues with your pelvic floor, you still need to work on strengthening it!

Pelvic floor dysfunction is not limited to leaking. If you are experiencing any issues with your bowel or bladder you should seek help. This may include incontinence of urine, stool or wind (from either the vagina or back passage), urgency and feeling like you can't 'hold on' when you need to go to the toilet or feeling like you need to go to the toilet very frequently. It may also include feeling of pressure around the vagina, back passage or bladder; as if something is coming down or perhaps a feeling there is a tampon inside. It can also include issues with sex (whenever it is you feel ready to start having sex again!) Pain with sex, leaking during sex, loss of sensation, loss of enjoyment or inability to orgasm can also be related to issues with your pelvic floor.

Pelvic floor issues are common following vacuum and forceps deliveries but not normal and should always be assessed to prevent potential issues later in life. If you have concerns about your pelvic floor please do not suffer in silence – you can self refer to the physiotherapy department in The National Maternity Hospital for the year following your delivery. Just phone 01-6373499 or email physio@nmh.ie

Exercising Your Pelvic Floor Muscles

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.

Going Home

Remember it takes time to get over both carrying and delivering a baby and it will take time for you to heal. 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 yourself as well as looking after your baby.

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. It is recommended that you have a pelvic floor assessment before resuming higher impact activities.

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.

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.

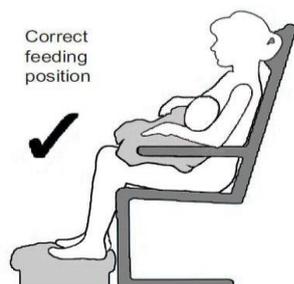
Looking After Your Back

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.

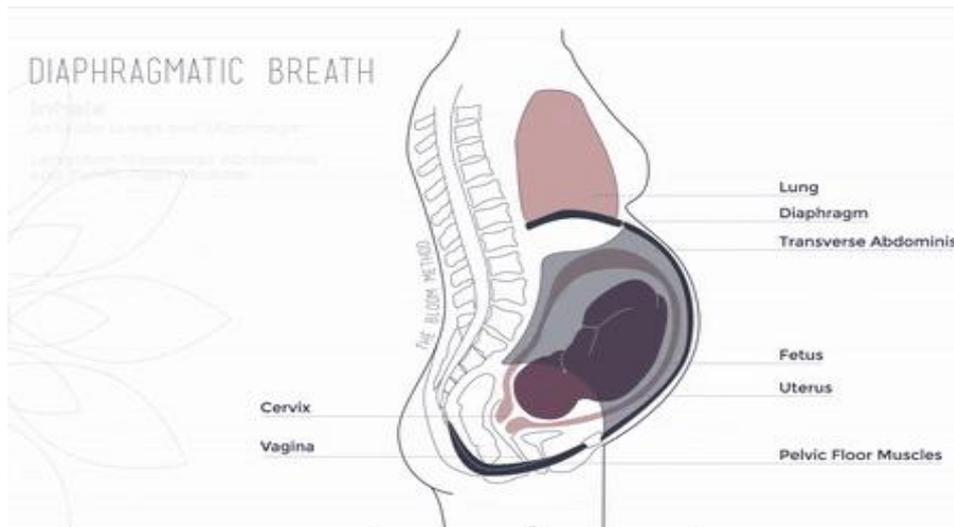


Diaphragmatic Breathing

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.

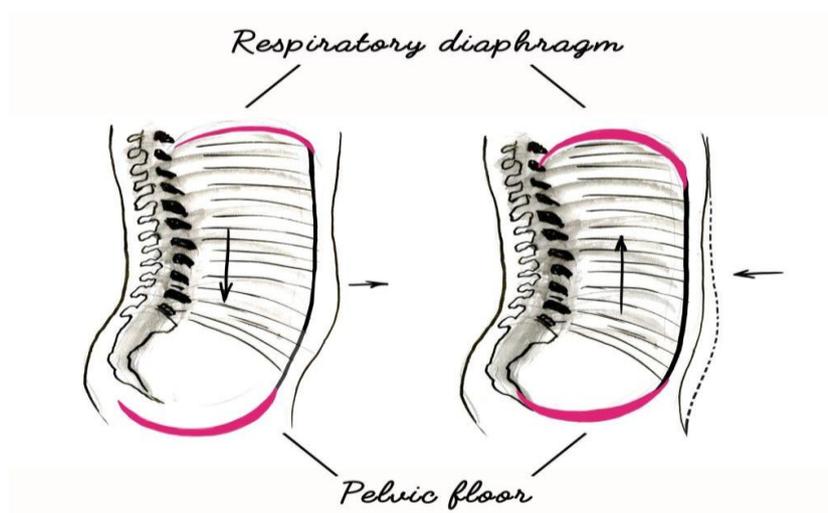
The diaphragm is the muscle that sits just below your lungs. It helps to think of your abdomen like a cylinder. Your pelvic floor makes up the bottom of the cylinder, your diaphragm is the top of the cylinder and your tummy and back muscles will make up the walls of the cylinder. In order for diastasis 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

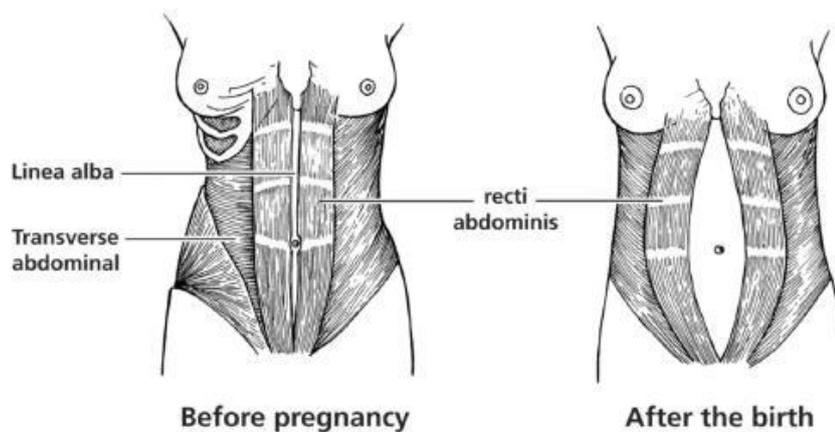
Some amount of natural healing will take place in the next 6-8 weeks so it is important to be patient with yourself and your rehab. Make sure to eat well as a healthy diet can assist in promoting healing of a diastasis. You can start to do some gentle exercise in these early weeks (see below). Be mindful 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 painfree. 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.

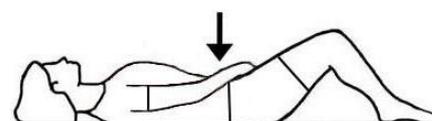
Exercise 1: Deep abdominal muscles

- 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

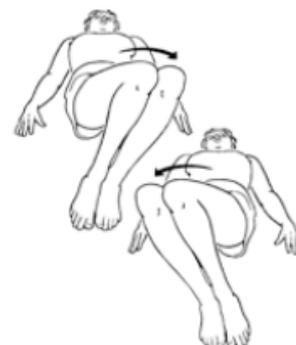
Exercise 2: Pelvic Tilt

- 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.



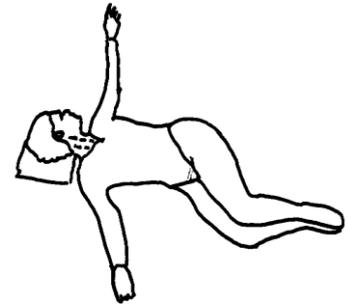
Exercise 3: Knee Rolling

- 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.



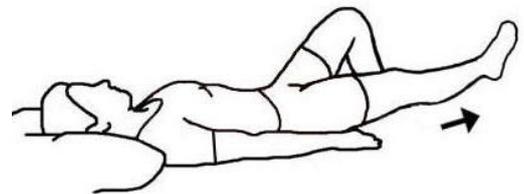
Exercise 4: Arm Opening

- 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.



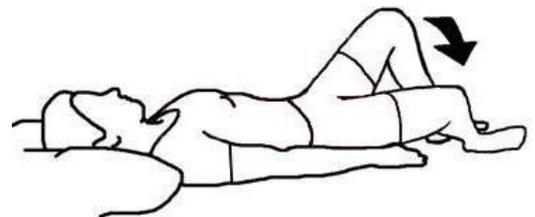
Exercise 5: Leg slides

- 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.



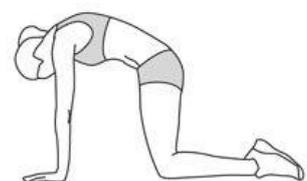
Exercise 6: Single knee fall out

- 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 7: 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



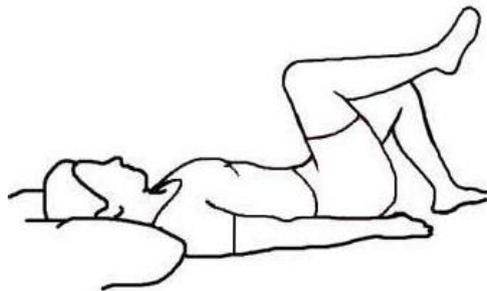
Exercise 8: Child's Pose

- 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



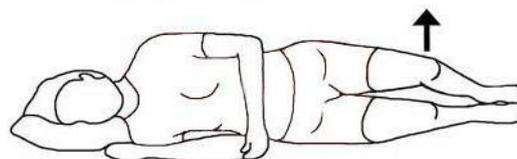
Exercise 9: Knee bends

- 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 10: 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.



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

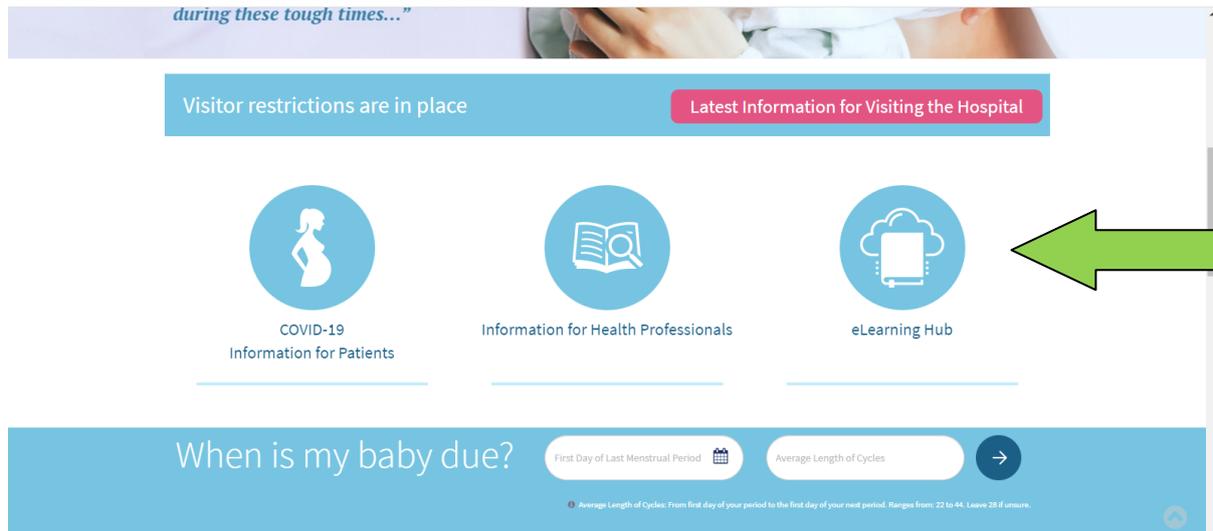
We are currently running a weekly 'Healthy Bodies After Birth' class for postnatal women. This will be held online. You are welcome to attend up to three months postnatally.

To secure a link please email:

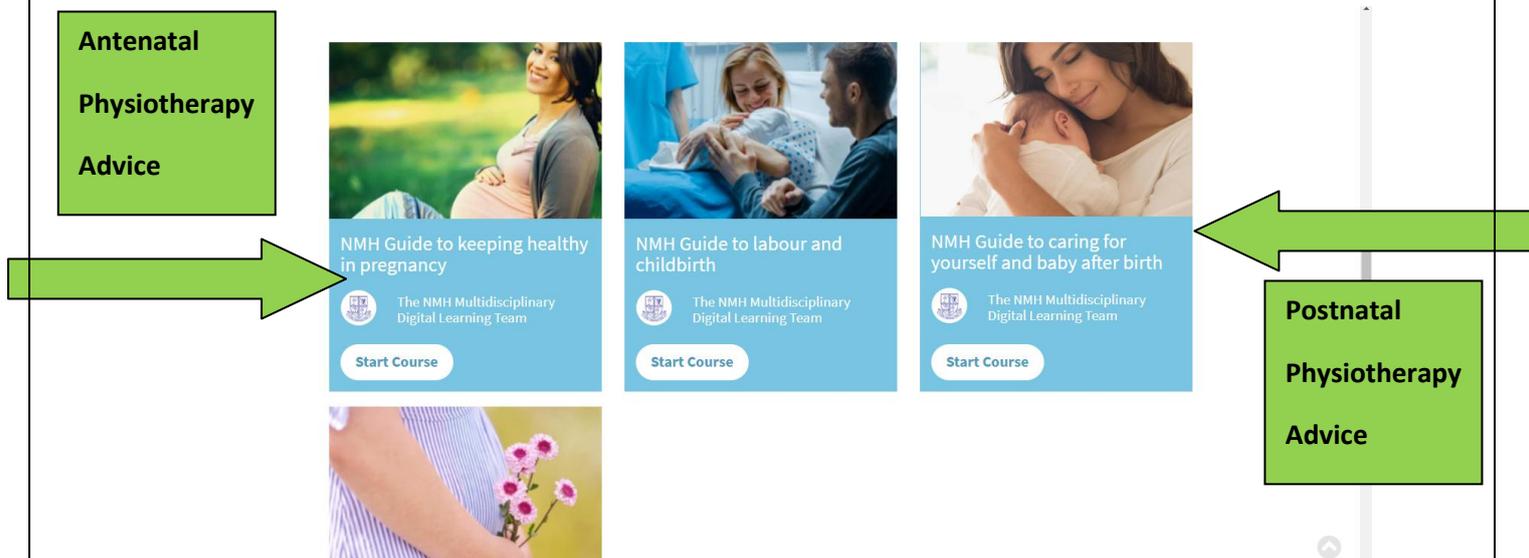
njordan@nmh.ie

How to Access NMH Physiotherapy Information online

1. Visit 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.

- 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