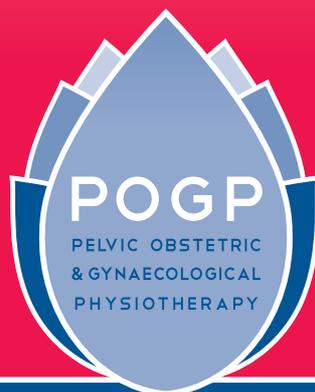


Fit for Pregnancy

Keep healthy and cope
with the physical
demands of pregnancy
- exercises and advice
to help you



EDUCATES, SUPPORTS AND PROMOTES SPECIALIST PHYSIOTHERAPISTS

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Getting help

If you have any difficulty with the exercises in this booklet, or find that your symptoms are not improving, ask to be referred, or if available, refer yourself to a physiotherapist with experience in treating women with pelvic floor muscle problems.

To find your nearest specialist physiotherapist visit:

pogp.csp.org.uk

or contact:

POGP administration Fitwise Management Ltd. Blackburn House Redhouse Road Bathgate West Lothian EH47 7AQ

T: 01506 811077 E: info@fitwise.co.uk

If your ability to follow the advice in this booklet is affected by any health problem, contact your local specialist physiotherapist who will be able to help with appropriate alternatives.

Other relevant booklets are available from: pogp.csp.org.uk

Glossary

pelvic floor muscles - the group of muscles spanning the base of your bony pelvis, held in place by ligaments which support the pelvic organs. Pelvic floor muscle exercises / Kegels will help keep these muscles strong

abdominal muscles - the multi-layer of muscles at the front of your body which work with the back muscles to provide support and help protect your spine

labour - the process of the uterus expelling the products of conception including the placenta

Fit for Pregnancy

This booklet is designed to help you understand how to reduce the strain on your body and provide you with information on postures, positions and exercises that when carried out routinely may help to make you more comfortable.

If problems do not ease ask your midwife or doctor to refer you to a specialist physiotherapist.

Exercise and pregnancy

Mild to moderate exercise is good for you and your developing baby and most healthy women will find a programme of moderate exercise beneficial. Pregnancy can be a good opportunity to improve your level of fitness. Brisk walking and swimming (or aquanatal classes) are excellent. If you are used to exercising you can continue with your normal routine if you feel well.

If you are not used to exercising, you may wish to start with some low impact exercise/activities such as walking, swimming, static bike, gym ball, core stability exercises or chair based exercises with small hand weights and/or therabands. Begin with 15 minutes continuous activity, 3 times a week, gradually increasing to 30 minutes at least 4 times a week. As your pregnancy progresses continue with familiar activities and remember that it is natural to slow down. Any activity which produces significant pain should be avoided.

Exercising tips:

- drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration
- work within your own limits to avoid getting too hot or too breathless

- listen to your body - stop if you are uncomfortable, tired or feeling unwell
- if you were running regularly before you became pregnant, it is safe to continue during pregnancy possibly at a lower intensity but might get uncomfortable as you get larger
- be cautious in the gym - ask for help on which machines to use and how to use them correctly
- competitive / contact and new sports may be risky, and should be avoided
- hot/ humid/high altitude and low depth conditions are generally not suitable for pregnant women
- rapid twists and turns and changes of direction may cause pain - take care
- long periods of lying on your back over 16 weeks pregnant are to be avoided

Stop any activity that produces pain, especially in the back or pelvis.

It may help to attend a specific pregnancy exercise class instructed by a qualified, specialist instructor, which should include work on posture, stabilisation for the spine and pelvis and functional techniques in standing.

Pelvic joints and spine

Your pelvis consists of three bones and three joints; one of these joints is at the front and two are at the back. The bones form a protective cavity or basin for your bladder, womb and bowel.

The spine consists of many small bones (vertebrae). The joints of the spine and pelvis are supported by ligaments and muscles, which provide stability and help to maintain a good posture.

Hormonal changes during pregnancy soften these ligaments and the joints become less stable; the resultant increase in movement could lead to aches and pains in the back and pelvis. As a result of the increasing weight of your baby and a change in your centre of gravity, your posture may also change, which may place further strain on your back.

Here are some suggestions which may help you to reduce the risk of strain and discomfort:

- sit correctly, and wherever possible, sit rather than stand when performing routine tasks, eg ironing, preparing the vegetables
- ensure your work surface is at the correct height, both at home and at work

- when shopping, carry evenly weighted loads in each hand
- try to avoid carrying your toddler on one hip; if you must do so, alternate the hip you use
- to correctly get in and out of a car: sit first then bring your legs in to the car. To get out: place both feet out of the car and using your arms to help push yourself into standing
- use correct technique for lifting and avoid heavy loads
- trying to spend time lying on either side which will help spread the load. Try to get in and out of bed correctly
- use your abdominal/tummy muscles (as described below) for support and protection of your spine and pelvis for all activities which require effort

If you experience significant pelvic girdle pain, seek medical advice or a referral to a specialist physiotherapist. Your GP or midwife should be able to arrange this (see POGP booklet 'Pregnancy-Related Pelvic Girdle Pain' page 11).

Abdominal muscles

Your tummy muscles will stretch naturally as your baby grows. As they stretch they may weaken. It is important to use these muscles correctly to maintain their strength, to provide support for your back and your baby, and to encourage good posture.

Your body has its own deep abdominal support muscles which act like a corset to support your growing baby.

Finding and exercising your abdominal muscles

The deepest abdominal muscles are called Transversus Abdominis (TA) and they work together with the other abdominal muscles and your pelvic floor muscles to support your back and help with good posture.

It is important to get the basic TA contraction right. It is not always easy - always seek help if you are finding it difficult. (If you are finding lying on your back uncomfortable this exercise can be adapted to a side lying position.)

See picture:

1. Lie on your back with knees bent, feet on the floor, relax into the floor.
2. Find neutral spine - neither too tucked nor too arched

3. Find your hip bones (arrows A) and move your fingers 2cm down and 2cm inwards - your fingers will now be on your deep abdominals (TA)
4. Breathe in gently allowing your tummy to rise. As you let the breath out, keep your back and ribs relaxed while drawing in your lower tummy (at the navel/ belly button level) towards the spine. You will probably feel the muscles under your fingers tense up. Keep the spine in the neutral position and the pelvis still.
5. Keep this contraction in the deep abdominals for 2 or 3 breaths and then relax fully.

Once you are happy with this exercise, you can try using this muscle in a variety of positions. (see picture on all fours).

This is the muscle to use for support when you are being physically active with bending, lifting, standing for a period of time. You can increase the length of hold of the abdominal contraction as you strengthen these muscles. Be sure not to hold your breath.

Pelvic floor muscles

This is the group of muscles spanning the base of your boney pelvis, held in place by ligaments that support the pelvic organs.

They are important for:

- the control your bladder and bowel
- sexual function and pleasure
- the stability of the pelvic and lumbar joints
- the support of your pelvic organs helping to prevent prolapse
- the support of your growing baby

The increasing weight of your baby during pregnancy, followed by the delivery, may weaken your pelvic floor muscles. If this support is reduced you may leak urine when you exert yourself, especially after your baby is born. To try to prevent this you should exercise your pelvic floor muscles every day.

Pelvic Floor Muscle (PFM) Exercises

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind at the same time as trying to stop passing urine. You should feel a squeeze and a lift inside the

vagina. Do not hold your breath. Do not clench your buttocks.

You can check if you are using the right muscles by feeling inside the vagina with a finger to feel the vaginal walls tighten, or have a look with a mirror as you practice and you will see the area between the vagina and anus (perineum) move inwards. If you see any significant downward movement or bulging at the vagina then stop and get help to get the right muscles working from a specialist physiotherapist .

Pelvic floor muscle exercises (sometimes called Kegels) should include long squeezes as well as short, quick squeezes. You should aim to work the muscles until they tire and do the exercises regularly to help the muscles become stronger and more effective.

Long squeezes

- Tighten your PFM, hold them tight, then release and let them fully relax. How long can you hold the squeeze?
- Repeat the squeeze and hold until the PFM tire. How many times can you repeat the squeezes?

Short squeezes

- Quickly tighten your pelvic floor muscles, then immediately let them go again. How many times can you do this quick squeeze before the muscles tire?
- Always let the muscles fully relax after each squeeze

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

- Aim to do 10 long squeezes, holding each for 10 seconds, relax the muscles for 10 seconds then do 10 short squeezes
- You may need to start with 'little and often' if you find that you can only hold the squeeze for a short time, or only do a few before the muscles tire
- You should do your PFM exercises at least 3 times a day. Starting in lying and sitting positions and progressing to standing and active positions such as walking and bending.
- Build up your exercise routine gradually over the weeks and months. If your muscles were weak, you should notice an improvement in 3-5 months. Then keep up the practise to maintain the improvement.

The Knack

Draw up and tighten your pelvic floor muscles before any activity that increases the intra-abdominal pressure (coughing/ sneezing/ laughing/ bending) to help the pelvic floor muscles resist the downward movement of the pelvic organs including the uterus.

How to rest comfortably

Relaxation is a technique you can learn to use during your pregnancy and afterwards. Practising it during your pregnancy will help you to rest more effectively and comfortably and can also help to get you back to sleep if you wake during the night.

Sometimes people feel extremely tired or develop aches and pains, which can be related to tension. Tension may cause an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, and rate of breathing which can lead to feelings of panic and loss of control. Using relaxation can help to reduce, or prevent tension from building up. Stress and tension are common in pregnancy, especially as many women choose to work, look after children or are involved in other commitments, into late pregnancy.

Some women who practise relaxation and are able to use it during labour may be able to cope better with the pain and feel more in control (see POGP booklet 'Mitchell Method of Simple Relaxation').

Minor problems

Constipation

Constipation may cause you to strain on the toilet which adds pressure and unwanted stretch to your pelvic floor muscles.

Try to drink enough fluids to help prevent this. If you become very constipated and are having difficulty emptying your bowels speak to your GP who may suggest mild medication to help keep your bowels moving.

Leg cramps

These are due to changes in body chemistry and changing pressures in the abdomen.

Wearing very high-heeled shoes or sitting cross-legged can make leg cramps worse.

Some women find that it helps to exercise their feet before going to bed:

- Ankle circles 10 times each way briskly
- Calf stretches - leaning against a wall. Alternatively in sitting - with your legs out straight, pull your toes up to stretch the calf, hold for a few moments then release
- Massaging the calf muscles

If this advice does not help, your doctor may be able to give you some medication, so do ask.

Swollen ankles and varicose veins

From about four months of pregnancy it is more comfortable for you and your baby if you can avoid lying flat on your back. Try to rest lying on your side with your legs slightly bent. Briskly move your feet up and down for at least thirty seconds at a time, every hour or so. Avoid standing for long periods and consider wearing support tights.

Numb, tingling or painful, hands and fingers

This may be a problem, often at night or first thing in the morning, and is due to extra fluid in the body, which increases pressure at the wrist. The physiotherapist may supply you with wrist supports to wear at night, which can help to reduce the symptoms.

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

Ribflare

This is the name given to discomfort over your lower ribs. It is due to your growing baby pushing your ribs away from their normal position. Try to change position frequently and avoid sitting on low chairs and in other positions which bring your ribs close to your pelvis. You may find temporary relief by lifting your arm on the affected side and bending sideways away from the ache.

Emotional changes

The hormonal changes in pregnancy may lead to emotional ups and downs and sometimes forgetfulness. This can have a significant impact on how you feel or cope with pregnancy changes. If you are worried about coping with these emotional changes help is available from your midwife, or GP.

Other POGP booklets available which may help you are:

- Fit for birth
- Pregnancy-related Pelvic Girdle Pain (for mothers-to-be and new mothers)
- The Mitchell Method of Simple Relaxation
- Fit for the Future (postnatal exercise booklet)

For details of these and more information visit the POGP website (pogp.csp.org.uk)

Other helpful resources can be found at: www.rcog.uk and your Local NHS Trust website

