"Now you've had your baby there are four important ways in which you can care for your body."

1. Most of your body's pregnancy changes return to normal automatically (your uterus will have reduced in size by 6-8 weeks and your ligaments will have tightened up by around 5 months after your baby's birth). But, some after effects of pregnancy and labour will need your time and effort before there is a return to full strength and function. Your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles are stretched and weak and it is particularly important for your future health and comfort that they recover properly. The right kind of exercise, starting gently and gradually becoming stronger, is essential.

2. Some of the things you do with and for your baby can lead or add to back pain if done awkwardly or incorrectly. Using your back properly will help to reduce strain.

3. Having a new baby can be very stressful and tiring. A short spell of relaxation every day is a "must"; it can be a lifesaver!

4. Although most new mums make an excellent recovery after childbirth, some problems can linger on; back and joint pain, stress incontinence (a bladder which leaks when you cough, sneeze, run or jump) and abdominal and pelvic floor muscles which remain weak and flabby. Don't just put up with these discomforts or feel that nothing can be done to help. Women's Health Physiotherapists are specially trained to deal with these and other postnatal problems.

To find your local Women's Health Physiotherapist contact

The Secretary, The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health, c/o The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 14 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4ED.
Tel: 020 7306 6666
The exercises in this leaflet will give you a good start towards improving your abdominal and pelvic floor muscle strength. There are several books and videos available on this subject that may be helpful to you. One such video is 'Pilates in Pregnancy'. This video is endorsed by The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health. You may contact your Women's Health Physiotherapist, Midwife or Health Visitor for details of this video and other currently recommended material.

Your pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor muscles form a basin underneath your pelvis and help to keep your bowel, uterus and bladder in place. They also help control your bladder and bowels so that you don’t leak urine, wind or faeces.

Basic pelvic floor exercises

Squeeze shut your back passage (as if holding back wind), your vagina (as if gripping a tampon) and your urethra (as if stopping your urine flow), and draw your pelvic floor muscles inwards and upwards. Then relax and let your pelvic floor lower again. Always rest for a few seconds before trying again.
How to check if you are doing the exercises properly

1. Try and stop or slow down your urine flow towards the end of your stream - then relax and finish emptying your bladder. This is a test and not an exercise - only do it to find your pelvic floor initially.

2. Hold a mirror so that you can see your back passage and your vagina. You should see a "lifting" movement.

3. Put your fingers on your perineum (the area between your back passage and vagina) - feel the upward movement as you squeeze. You can also put two fingers in your vagina and try and feel the muscles contract from the back and sides.

4. When you resume intercourse, try squeezing around your partner's penis.

5. Sometimes it is very difficult to know if you are doing a pelvic floor contraction properly. Ask your GP at your 6 week postnatal check to help you learn how to re-train the muscle.

How to do the pelvic floor exercise as your muscles get stronger

If your pelvic floor area is very sore or swollen immediately after your baby is born, gentle rhythmic little squeezes will help relieve pain if done frequently, for 30 seconds at a time.

Early on
- Only hold each squeeze for as long as you can - maybe 3-4 seconds. Remember not to clench your buttocks too.
- Pause for a few seconds between each squeeze.
- Repeat 4-5 times.

Later
- Try to contract your pelvic floor more strongly and hold for longer (5-10 seconds). Add some quick strong squeezes - remember to let go after each one. Try to do the quick squeeze when you cough or sneeze.

Stronger still
- Hold each squeeze for 10 seconds. Repeat this exercise 10 times, if possible, with a 4 second break in between. Remember not to hold your breath or clench your buttocks.

Keep practising the quick squeezes too.
When to do your pelvic floor exercises?

You can exercise your pelvic floor muscles whatever you are doing! Lying (on your back, side or tummy), sitting (while you feed your baby, or when in the car, or when chatting on your mobile phone) and standing up (ironing or in queues).

Your abdominal muscles

As your abdomen enlarges in pregnancy, the muscles stretch and lengthen and often separate down the centre leaving a gap after birth. To check the width of this gap, lie on the floor with your knees bent up towards you, with the middle fingers of one hand, press down into and across your abdomen at the level of your umbilicus (tummy button). Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles then lift your head and shoulders, breathing out as you reach for your toes with your other hand. You should feel a space which narrows as you lift your head and shoulders higher. If you have a very wide gap you may need to use the fingers of both hands to check and you may need the guidance of a Women’s Health Physiotherapist to teach you how to safely progress your exercises to ensure the gap closes.
early abdominal exercises

The deep abdominal muscles

1. This exercise will help to close the gap between all the abdominal muscles and will shorten your elongated muscles and encourage them to lie side by side again. Lie on your side comfortably. Let your tummy relax! 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. Repeat 4-5 times, resting in between. Aim to build up to a 10 second hold repeated 10 times.

2. Try squeezing your pelvic floor at the same time, if you can. Repeat 4-5 times, resting in between. Aim to build up to a 10 second hold repeated 10 times.

3. Try these exercises both sitting and standing.

After your 6 week check

When the bleeding stops and as this becomes easier try the exercise kneeling down on all fours with your back straight and still. Eventually, try to draw the deep abdominal muscles in, along with a pelvic floor squeeze whenever you lift your baby or shopping.

The basic pelvic tilt

Once you can do the deep abdominal exercise, you can try this. It continues to restore your muscles to their normal length. Lie on your back with both knees bent. Breathe in. As you breathe out, draw your abdominal muscles as in the previous exercise and tilt your pelvis by gently squeezing your buttocks so that your back flattens into the floor/mattress. Hold the position for 5 seconds, breathing out and then relax. Repeat this exercise 4-5 times. Aim to build up to a 10 second hold repeated 10 times.
Head lift

Lie on your back and breath in. As you breathe out prepare with a deep abdominal contraction, pelvic floor squeeze and pelvic tilt, then gently lift just your head for a few seconds, breathing normally. Then rest back for a few seconds before repeating. Try 3-4 times and aim to build up to 10 repetitions.

If your tummy pushes out STOP! Go back to the earlier exercises - you may need to contact a Women’s Health Physiotherapist for help.

later
abdominal
exercises

The head and shoulder lift

When your gap is less than 3 fingers wide and providing your tummy stays pulled in throughout this exercise, you can progress by:

1. Lifting your head for longer - up to 10 seconds maximum. Always rest between each lift.

2. Lifting your head and shoulders and reach for your knees, checking that your tummy stays pulled in.

Always squeeze your pelvic floor muscles with this exercise as increased pressure is put on the pelvic floor which can weaken it.