

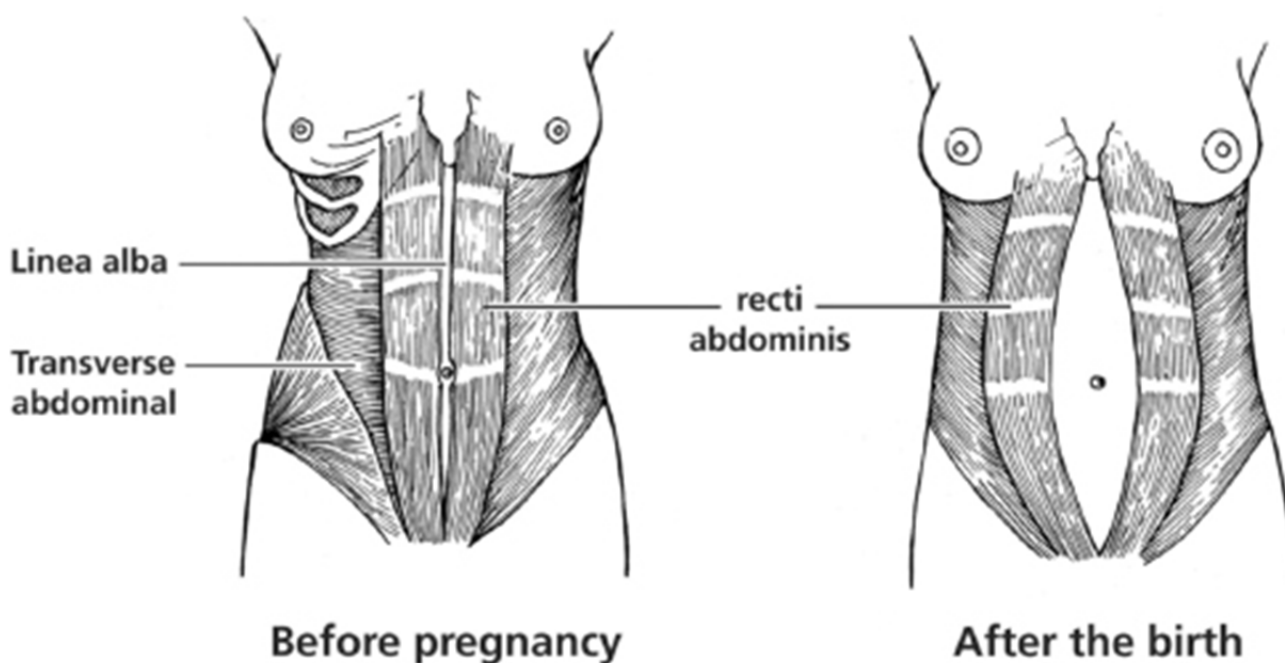
Pelvic Health Physiotherapy

Diastasis of rectus abdominis muscles postpartum

What is diastasis of the rectus abdominis muscles?

Diastasis rectus abdominis refers to the thinning and widening of the connective tissue in the midline of the abdominal wall between the abdominal muscles resulting in a separation of these muscles. It is associated with laxity of the abdominal wall.

A separation of these muscles towards the end of pregnancy should be considered a normal and necessary adaptation to accommodate the growing baby. This separation generally resolves in the weeks following child birth. For unknown reasons, for approximately 1 in 3 women, it may not naturally resolve.



Factors thought influence a diastasis

There are several factors that are thought to influence a diastasis. These include:

- Pregnancy, especially multiples (twins/triplets).
- Genetics, some people may be more at risk due to the composition of their connective tissue.
- IVF (due to potential prolonged hormonal influence)
- Exercise that excessively and repeatedly loads the abdominal wall.
- Repeated and prolonged heavy lifting.

Most pregnant woman will have a small separation of one to two finger widths after pregnancy. However, if the gap at your midline is more than two finger widths and has a visible bulge, you

may have a diastasis and need to see a physiotherapist. Ask your GP to refer you to the pelvic health physiotherapy team if you have been diagnosed with a diastasis.

What to expect from physiotherapy

Following assessment your physiotherapy treatment may include advice on daily activities, back care/lifting and an abdominal and pelvic floor exercise program. Your physiotherapist may also provide you with an elasticated support to wear during the day, until you regain some muscular control.

Back care advice

Avoid all activities that place stress on your stomach such as:

- all strenuous exercises that cause your abdominal wall to bulge out
- sit ups/abdominal crunches
- lifting and carrying heavy objects
- holding your baby on one hip
- rising from a lying position by pulling up and twisting at the same time
- Impact exercise

When getting out of bed, always roll onto your side, drop your legs off together and push up into a sitting position with your arms. Do the reverse to get back into bed.

When lifting your baby, draw in to tighten your tummy muscles, bend your knees and bring baby into your chest when you lift.

Abdominal exercises

The following exercises will help reduce strain on your back, improve posture and trunk control. Try to do each exercise within your range of comfort.

Abdominal tightening

Your abdominal muscles form a natural corset supporting your back and internal organs.

To exercise your deep abdominal muscles lie on your back with your knees bent. Take an 'in' breath and as you breathe out gently tighten and draw in your lower abdominal muscles (imagine you are drawing your belly button towards your spine).



This should be a small movement. Repeat a few times and as you feel more confident with this exercise you can aim to hold the contraction for up to 10 seconds and aim to repeat up to 10 times, three times a day. You may prefer to do this exercise lying on your side/sitting/standing up. Try start using this drawing in movement with your normal daily activities such as lifting, bending or walking.

Pelvic tilting

Lying on your back with your knees bent, draw in your lower abdominal muscles and gently tilt your pelvis backwards flattening your lower back into the bed and curling your tailbone upwards. Repeat a few times and as you feel more confident and comfortable with this exercise you can aim to repeat up to 10 times, three times a day. Try to avoid pushing through your feet to achieve the movement.



Heel slides

Lying on your back with your knees bent, draw in your lower abdominal muscles. Whilst holding this contraction in your lower abdominal muscles slide one heel away from you, keeping the heel in contact with the floor. Slide the heel back and repeat on the other leg. Remember, you must maintain the contraction in your lower abdominals throughout this exercise. Don't hold your breath while exercising. Aim to repeat up to 10 times, three times a day.



Pelvic floor exercises

The pelvic floor muscles will be weaker post-natal due to the extra weight carried during pregnancy and labour. These muscles work with the deep abdominal muscles to support the spine.

How to exercise your pelvic floor

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and the flow of urine. This feeling of 'squeezing and lifting' or squeezing and drawing inwards is called the basic pelvic floor contraction. Try exercise in different positions: lying, sitting or standing. You will need to do fewer than the numbers outlined below if you feel discomfort or if your muscles tire quickly when you do your exercises.

Do not tighten your buttocks/ thighs or hold your breath as you work the pelvic floor muscles. Ensure the muscles 'let go' and relax fully when you stop tightening.

Long squeezes

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold them as tightly as you can for 5-10 seconds, then release and let them fully relax for 5-10 seconds. Repeat this squeeze and relax sequence between 3-10 times until you feel the muscles tire.

Short squeezes

Tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles quickly, then immediately let go fully. Aim for 10 repetitions in a row if you can but if this is too much then just start with 2 or 3 and gradually build up from there.

During a cough, sneeze or during lifting activities, always tighten your pelvic floor to support the pelvic organs.

If you experience any abdominal or pelvic pain during or after exercising these muscles please discuss this with your midwife, pelvic health physiotherapist or general practitioner.

Sources of information

Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy Courses and Publications

Important information

This patient information is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

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Hand hygiene

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Tel: 0300 131 4434 Email: esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Department - Community Health & Integrated Care (CHIC)

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