Antenatal Physiotherapy Care

Exercises and Advice

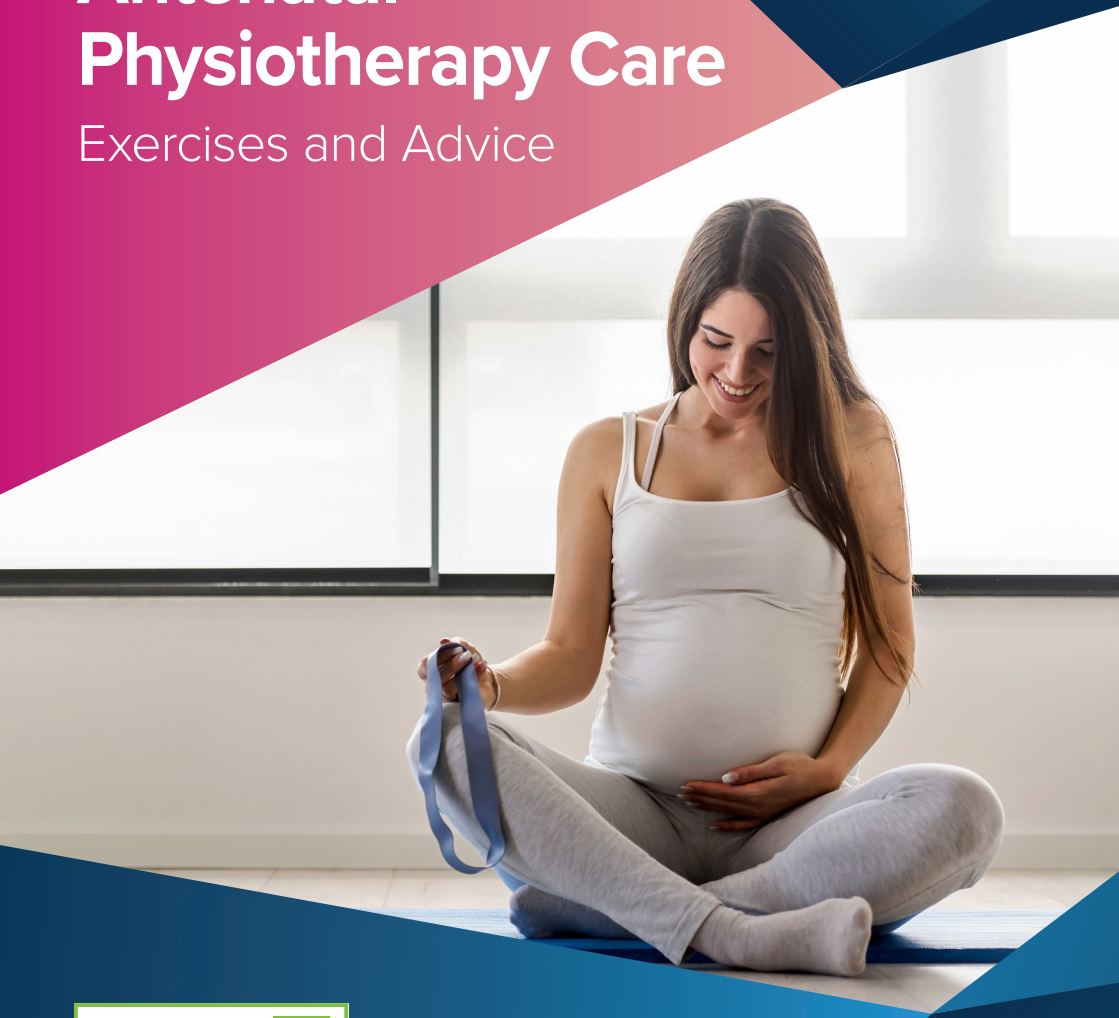

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Table of Contents

Physical Changes During Pregnancy 4

Pelvic Floor Muscles (PFM's) 5

Rectus Diastasis 6

Pubic Symphysis and Sacroiliac Joint Pain 7

Back Care 8

Bladder and Bowel Care 9

Exercise Guidelines 11

Exercises 12

Abdominal bracing 12

Stretches 13

Other Recommended Exercises 13

Recovery after a vaginal delivery or caesarean 14

Resources 14

Follow Up Care 14

Ramsay Health Plus – Allied Health Outpatient Clinics 15

Disclaimer: The information in this booklet reflects the latest revision at the time of publication. In cases where your doctor or health care team provides instructions that differ from those in this booklet, please follow their recommendations. For any questions or concerns, consult your doctor or health care team. For urgent care needs, contact 000 or visit the nearest Emergency Department.

Introduction

Welcome to your antenatal journey. This booklet has been designed to support you throughout your pregnancy, providing guidance on physical changes, self-care, and preparation for birth. During pregnancy, your body will undergo many changes, including the stretching and softening of your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles. These changes can affect posture and may increase the risk of discomfort or injury. Inside, you will find recommendations, exercises, and practical tips to help you care for your body, strengthen your muscles, and prepare for a healthy and confident transition into parenthood.

Relaxing hormone results in 'softening' of ligaments

Increased breast size results in rounded shoulders and poked chin

Enlarged belly and weight gain results in a change in your centre of gravity

Exaggerated spinal curvatures and rotation of pelvis

Generalised swelling which can result in carpal tunnel, lower limb and vulval varicosities

Increased strain on muscles and ligaments

Stretched and weakened abdominal and pelvic floor muscles

Increased urinary frequency and slower bowel function



Physical Changes During Pregnancy

The physical changes of pregnancy can lead to changes in your posture and increased stress and strain on your musculoskeletal system. To best manage this, you should:

- Maintain good posture and move well
- Stretch regularly
- Perform appropriate exercise
- Strengthen your deep abdominal and pelvic floor muscles

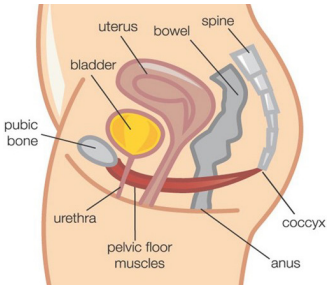
Pelvic Floor Muscles (PFM's)

What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor is a sling of muscles that sit at the base of the pelvis. These muscles stretch like a hammock from the pubic bone to the tailbone (coccyx) and from side to side. They are part of a group of muscles referred to as your "core".

Why is the pelvic floor important?

- They maintain continence of your bladder and bowel
- They support your abdominal organs
- They assist in better sexual function
- They have a role in supporting your back
- They prevent and reduce the risk of prolapse



During pregnancy and delivery, the pelvic floor muscles may be stretched and weakened. Strengthening these muscles during pregnancy may help lower the risk of bladder or bowel issues during and after pregnancy and may support recovery following delivery.

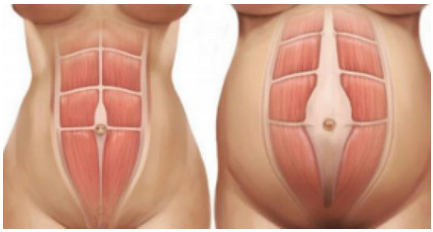
Perineal Massage

If you are planning a vaginal delivery, you may consider perineal massage in the third trimester. Please contact your Women's Health Physiotherapist if you would like more information.

Follow Up Care

For additional details, questions, or to discuss birth preparation, please contact the Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Rectus Diastasis



What is Rectus Diastasis?

Rectus diastasis is stretching of the connective tissue (linea alba) that widens the front abdominal (rectus) muscles.

Why does it occur?

The connective tissue located in the midline of your abdomen is designed to stretch to accommodate the growth of your baby. This widening is a normal part of pregnancy for most pregnant women; however, some women experience excessive stretch or damage to the connective tissue due to the combination of hormone changes and growth of the fetus. This impairs their ability to effectively use their abdominal muscles during and after pregnancy. In most cases the condition resolves naturally over the first 8 weeks post-delivery. It is normal for the connective tissue to heal slightly broader than the pre-pregnant state.

How is it diagnosed?

A Physiotherapist can perform a physical assessment to determine if a significant rectus diastasis is present and will advise on appropriate management.

What is the treatment and management ?

- Adopt movement patterns that lessen intra-abdominal pressure during a task (e.g. roll to get in/out of bed, breathe out when changing positions instead of holding your breath)
- Limit exercises that cause your abdominal wall to bulge or create a concave appearance in the midline
- Limit heavy lifting - Refer to page 10
- Standing posture - Refer to page 8
- Bowel care - Refer to page 9
- Getting in/out of bed - Refer to page 10

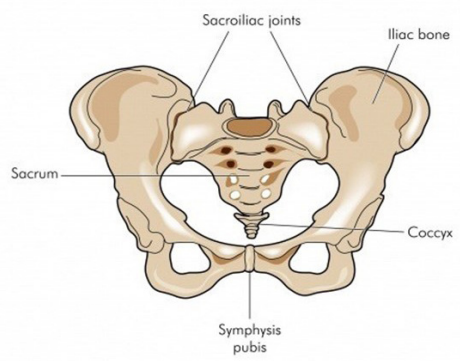
Follow Up Care

If you wish to receive an individualised assessment or recommendations, please contact your Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Pubic Symphysis and Sacroiliac Joint Pain

What is it?

During pregnancy many women experience pain in the joints around their pelvis and lower back, in particular, the pubic symphysis joint at the front of the pelvis and the sacroiliac joints at the back. This can occur due to changes in posture, pressure of carrying the baby and hormonal changes that cause softening of ligaments, which can lead to excess movement in these joints.



What is the treatment and management?

Try	Minimise
✓ Wear flat shoes with cushioning i.e. running shoes	x Painful movements i.e. vacuuming and mopping
✓ Wear a support belt	x Sitting with your legs crossed, in deep or low chairs and on the ground
✓ Stand with even weight on each leg	x Bending forwards for a long period of time
✓ Bend your hips and knees when you lift to keep your center of gravity over your feet	x Heavy lifting (if your child wants a hug, sit down and have them climb on your lap)
✓ Activate your pelvic floor and tummy muscles when exercising or lifting	x Sexual positions that cause pain
✓ Sit down for dressing and household chores	
✓ Take smaller steps	
✓ Walk up and down the stairs one step at a time	
✓ Change positions and move regularly	
✓ Continue exercising and staying active. Swimming and pool exercises are a great option.	
✓ Sleep on your side with a pillow between your legs. Wear slippery night clothes to turn easily in bed.	
✓ Log roll to get in/out of bed. See page 10	

Follow Up Care

If you are experiencing any symptoms, require further information, have any questions and/or concerns, please contact your Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Back Care

Positioning yourself well can ease stress and strain through your back and pelvis and will allow your stabilising muscles to work more effectively. This can mean reduced physical discomfort, improved room and better positioning for your baby. Regular changes in position will also assist with easing aches and pains.

Sitting

- Sit in a supportive chair with even weight through your thighs. Use a footstool if required
- Limit slumped posture and sitting with your pelvis tucked under (use a small, rolled towel behind your lower back if required)
- Keep your shoulders relaxed and sit tall
- Limit crossing your legs
- Set up your workplace to ensure a good work height and avoid excessive twisting and turning

Standing

- Ensure your weight is distributed evenly between your feet
- Have your rib cage stacked vertically on top of your pelvis
- Stand tall through the crown of your head with your shoulder blades pulled down and back, and your chin gently tucked in.



Sleeping

- Rest lying on your side; limit lying on your back
- Use pillows to support you as required: between your knees, lower back, arms, and under your belly

Bladder and Bowel Care

It is important that during pregnancy (and after delivery) you have good bladder and bowel habits. This includes:

- Drinking 1.5-2 litres of fluid daily (3 litres if breastfeeding)
- Limiting caffeine, alcohol and soft drink intake
- Following a healthy diet - full of fibre, fresh fruit and vegetables
- Engaging in regular exercise and practicing your pelvic floor exercises
- Sitting on the toilet seat - do not hover
- Emptying your bladder when it feels full – It is normal to empty your bladder 4-6 times a day and 0-1 times overnight. Emptying 300-400ml each time
- Emptying your bowels when you feel the urge. Go to the toilet within 5 minutes of feeling this urge

Use the correct position when opening your bowels:

- Limit slouching
- Head up and chest out
- Lean forward and rest your elbows on your knees
- Knees and feet apart
- Footstool – knees higher than the hips
- Relax your tummy, breathe and take your time
- Limit straining



Follow Up Care

If you are experiencing any bladder or bowel dysfunction, require further information and/or have any questions or concerns, please contact your Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Getting In and Out of Bed (Log Roll)

To limit straining your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles, try getting out of bed the following way:

- Bend your knees up, one at a time, keeping your feet flat on the bed
- Roll onto your side, keeping your knees together
- Push up on your lower elbow to a sitting position and breathe out whilst moving your legs over the side of the bed
- Sit on the edge of the bed with your feet flat on the floor, lean forwards and stand up
- To get back into bed, follow the same steps but in reverse.



Lifting

Limit heavy lifting as much as possible when you are pregnant. If you have to lift something, using a correct lifting technique is vital to help prevent back strain and injury:

- Position yourself close to the object
- Lunge forward by bending your hips and knees and keeping your back straight
- As you breathe out, lift and hold your pelvic floor muscles and draw in your abdominal muscles towards your spine



Exercise Guidelines

It is important to engage in appropriate exercise throughout your pregnancy. Exercise has many benefits for you, your baby and for your recovery.

- Reduce musculoskeletal pain and muscle cramps
- Improve swelling, circulation and reduce constipation
- Improve sleep and reduce fatigue
- Increase endurance and prepare for labour

Pregnancy hormones (such as Relaxin) and the biomechanical change of carrying your baby increases your risk of injury. If you are commencing a new program or changing your exercise program, you can discuss this with your Obstetrician or Physiotherapist.

Exercise Safety:

Tips:

- Continue your current physical activity
- If you are starting any new physical activity, please seek advice from your health care professional
- Include a warmup and cool down
- Ensure good posture and abdominal muscle bracing
- Wear cool, comfortable and supportive clothes

Intensity:

- Be able to maintain a conversation, which ensures you are not exercising at too high an intensity.

Limit:

- Exercising lying on your back
- Exercising in heat and for prolonged periods
- Holding your breath through exercises
- High impact activities or heavy weights

Stop and seek medical attention if you experience:

- Pain, discomfort or numbness
- Changes in baby movements
- Dizziness, blurred vision, nausea, or vomiting
- Bleeding, contractions, leaking or vaginal heaviness

Exercises

Pelvic Floor Exercises

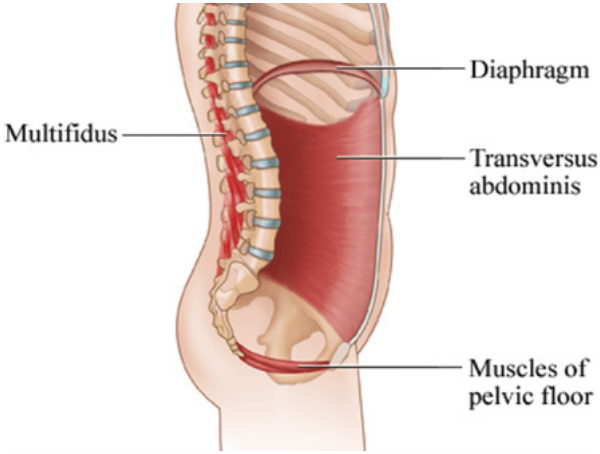
- Relax your thighs, buttocks and tummy and keep breathing normally
- Imagine what muscles you would tighten to stop yourself from passing wind or to 'hold on' from passing urine
- Gently tighten them around your front passage, vagina and back passage and hold. By doing this, you should feel your pelvic floor muscles 'lift up' inside you and feel a definite 'let go' as the muscles relax. If you can hold longer, then do so. Rest for a few seconds in between each squeeze. Your Women's Health Physiotherapist can provide a recommendation on the reps, sets and hold duration that is appropriate for you.
- Try this in different positions such as sitting and standing.
- Remember to turn on your Pelvic floor muscles (the 'Knack') when you feel you are about to leak i.e. when you cough, sneeze, laugh, blow your nose, or lift objects.

Abdominal bracing

Abdominal bracing is a contraction of your deep abdominal muscle (transverse abdominis). This muscle acts as a 'corset' and gives your pelvis and spine postural support. By tightening or 'bracing' your transverse abdominis together with your pelvic floor when you move and lift you will reduce the risk of straining your back, stomach or pelvic floor.

- You can practice lying on your side, sitting, standing or on your hands and knees.
- Breathe out, then gently draw up your pelvic floor muscles, and then draw in your lower tummy by drawing your belly button in towards your spine. Keep your back and pelvis still and in a neutral position. It should feel like you are doing up a zipper or pulling on a tight pair of pants.





Stretches

Stretching can assist you in maintaining good posture, reduce strain on your muscles and joints and help alleviate aches and pain. Take care to stretch gently and don't over-stretch. Stretching should not be painful - stop and seek advice if you experience pain.

The following stretches are some examples of stretches that may assist with discomfort in your back, hips and pelvis.



Other Recommended Exercises

- Walking or cycling
- Exercise classes with a trained Women's Health Physiotherapist
- Modified or antenatal pilates/yoga or low impact aerobics
- Swimming/water activities

Recovery after a vaginal delivery or caesarean

Please refer to the Ramsay Health Care Postnatal Physiotherapy Care Booklet for more information or discuss it with your Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Resources

- www.continence.org.au
- www.health.gov.au/topics/bladder-and-bowel
- www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au
- www.jeanhailes.org.au
- www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au

Follow Up Care

It is highly recommended to follow up with a Women's Health Physiotherapist if you experience and/or want more information on

- Musculoskeletal pain such as pelvic girdle pain, back pain, and/or neck pain
- Pregnancy pelvic girdle pain such as pubic symphysis and sacroiliac joint pain
- Bladder dysfunction such as urine leakage, urgency, difficulty emptying, and/or lack of sensation
- Bowel dysfunction such as faecal leakage, urgency, flatal incontinence, constipation or haemorrhoids
- Pelvic organ prolapse, vaginal heaviness sensation and/or bulged tissue
- Vaginal or rectal pain
- Pain with intercourse
- Birth preparation including perineal massage

If you have any queries or concerns, please consult your Doctor or Physiotherapist.



Ramsay Health Plus – Allied Health Outpatient Clinics

At Ramsay Health Plus, we have a comprehensive network of women's health physiotherapists ready to assist your recovery.

Please scan the QR code below to find your nearest clinic and to book your appointment online.

MR0060478 Maternity Antenatal Physiotherapy Care Booklet U 1126

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