



CARE OF YOUR BODY IN PREGNANCY

For healthcare
professionals
to give to parents



Congratulations on your pregnancy.

Pregnancy can be likened to an endurance event and your body will undergo significant changes in all the systems of your body including your brain!

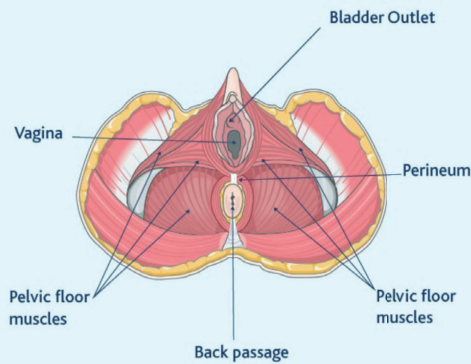
This booklet has been designed to inform and educate you about the pregnancy experience and what you can do to help yourself during this time.

Topics covered include:

- Pelvic Floor Muscles
- Perineal Massage
- Bowel Health
- Tummy Muscles During Pregnancy
- Sleep & Sleeping Positions
- Pelvic Pain Explained
- Exercise During Pregnancy
- Minor Pregnancy Concerns
- Planning for the Future



Pelvic Floor Muscles



THE PELVIC FLOOR ARE THE MUSCLES AT THE BASE OF THE PELVIS, THEIR FUNCTIONS INCLUDE;

- Primary support for pelvic organs, bladder/vagina/rectum
- Maintaining continence – urinary and faecal continence
- Support and guides the baby downwards during childbirth

The pelvic floor needs to be strong and flexible to function properly. Therefore, it needs to be able to relax and contract fully.
1 in 3 women report symptoms of urinary incontinence making it quite common but not normal. The pelvic floor lengthens and can weaken in pregnancy due to the weight of the baby regardless of whether you have a C-section or a vaginal delivery.

Pelvic floor exercises

Core breath connection - the pelvic floor works in tandem with your diaphragm – as you breathe in the pelvic floor naturally lengthens and relaxes downwards and as you exhale the pelvic floor returns to its resting position.

If you have suffered with pain in the pelvis, pain with intercourse or difficulty inserting tampons then your pelvic floor may be tight and may not function optimally. We can also carry tension in our pelvic floor.

If the pelvic floor is tight then you should first focus on the core connection breath as described above, breathe in deeply to assist in relaxing your pelvic floor.

Start with 4-5 deep breaths and then commence the pelvic floor lift exercises below.

Pelvic floor lift exercises:

- Lift your pelvic floor starting at the back passage (anus) and moving upwards towards the pubic bone. Imagine you are sucking a blueberry up through your back passage or stopping the flow of wind. Then continue to lift forwards to stop the flow of urine.
- Don't hold your breath or squeeze your buttocks.
- You can start in lying positions and progress to more upright positions.

The guidelines recommend 8-12 reps, 3 times a day, aiming for 10-second holds.



While it is important to learn to isolate and engage your pelvic floor muscles it is also good to know that your pelvic floor doesn't work in isolation, it will be activated with other forms of exercises. It has connections to our hip and abdominal muscles so exercises like squats, lunges and knee lifts have been shown to activate the pelvic floor even more than just the isolated lifts above.

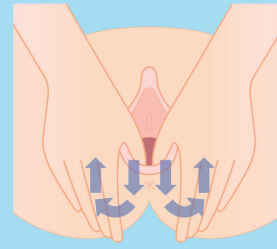
There are apps you can use to remind you to perform your pelvic floor exercises during the day like the Squeezy app.

How to know if you are doing your exercises correctly:

1. Try to gently slow or stop the flow of urine towards the end of your stream, then relax and finish emptying your bladder. This is a test, and not an exercise. It should not be done more than once a week.
2. Gently insert two fingers into your vagina, and try to feel the muscles contract from the back, sides and front.
3. During intercourse, try squeezing around your partner's penis. Your partner will be delighted to give you feedback as to how your strength is improving!
4. If in doubt about your pelvic floor we recommend seeking assessment and advice from a Womens Health Physiotherapist.



Perineal Massage



Perineal massage helps to increase blood flow to the perineum (pelvic floor), enhances circulation, stretches & increases the flexibility of the tissues for widening the vaginal opening for baby passage. It also mimics the effect of the baby's head during delivery; thus potentially making delivery easier.

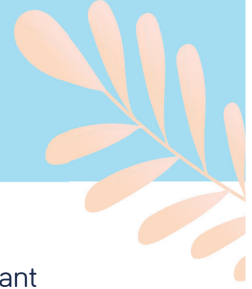
It has been shown that performing perineal massage in late pregnancy can lead to:

- Lower levels of episiotomies
- Lower levels of perineal tears, in particular third- and fourth-degree tears
- Better wound healing
- Less perineal pain
- Shorter second stage of labour
- Less anal incontinence

How to perform perineal massage:

- Start from week 34 onwards
- You can use a warm compress first
- Standing with one leg on chair/toilet
- Use water based lubricant or natural oils
- Thumbs placed inside vagina
- Press downwards towards anus and then out to the sides
- Slowly and gently press downwards in a U shape and continue for 3-5 minutes
- Aim to perform daily at the end of the pregnancy
- Some devices can help with perineal preparation such as the Epi-no or Aniball
- We recommend attending a Women's Health Physiotherapist to get advice on performing perineal massage and using these devices.

Bowel Health



The prevalence of constipation in pregnancy is 2-3-fold higher in pregnant women. This is due to many factors like hormones, diet, and the downward pressure of the baby. Straining to pass bowel movements can put more pressure on our pelvic floor. It is important to minimise constipation as much as possible.

Tips to manage constipation:

- **Morning routine** – the largest gut wave is 30-60 minutes after waking, aim for a high-fibre breakfast like porridge with linseeds or wholemeal toast with fruit like pear or kiwi. This will help to take advantage of the morning gut wave and should get the bowels moving, setting you up for the day.
- **Aim for fibre 30g/day:** whole grain foods/vegetables
- **Psyllium husk food supplement capsules** (high fibre supplement powder) can help bind stools
- **Stay hydrated** - drink plenty fluids – aiming for 10 glasses/day
- **Correct toileting position**



Knees higher than hips

use a stool under your feet to elevate the knees, lean forward and relax the tummy muscles and relax your breathing. This position helps to relax the muscles and increases the rectal canal angle, reducing straining on your pelvic floor. It is a game-changer!



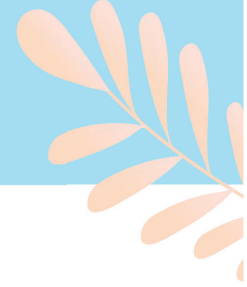
Tummy Muscles During Pregnancy

It is normal for the muscles of the tummy to stretch to accommodate the growing baby. The connective tissue between your left and right sit-up muscles becomes thinner and wider, creating a separation or gap in the middle. Slight separation towards the end of pregnancy should be considered a normal and necessary adaptation for the growing baby. This separation generally resolves naturally in the weeks after childbirth. If it persists beyond 6-8 weeks postnatally, it is recommended to attend a Chartered Physiotherapist in Women's Health to help you recover and rehabilitate these muscles effectively.

To help to minimise the load on the abdominal muscles during pregnancy here are a few tips:

- Get in and out of bed by rolling onto your side and pushing up with your arms.
- Avoid crunch (sit up) like positions that put more pressure through the abdominal muscles.
- Use arms to get out of low chairs/couch.
- Consider light compression clothing like leggings or vests that give a little more support than loose fitting clothes (these can be worn under looser fitting clothes too).
- SRC pregnancy shorts/leggings offer increased compression and support for the abdominal muscles as well as the lower back and pelvis (see useful sites section).
- Minimise constipation and reduce straining will also help to reduce intra-abdominal pressure.

Sleep & Sleeping Positions



Optimising sleep is key in pregnancy.

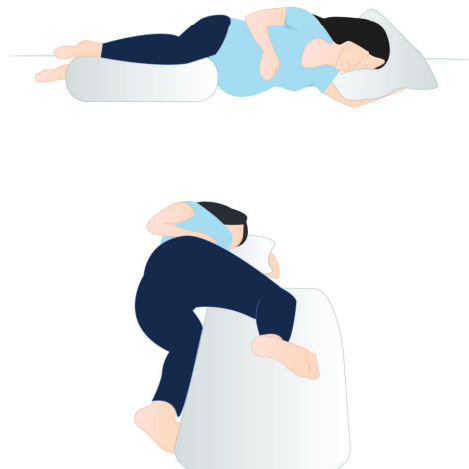
When turning and getting out of bed:

Take your time and bend both legs up, push through your heels and roll. Prop yourself on your elbows to push upwards to sitting. The Mama turn sliding sheet is designed especially for women with difficulty turning in bed who have pelvic pain or are post C-sections.



Sleep positions:

When lying on your side aim to have the top leg supported by pillows or a single duvet and you can also place a pillow under the bump.



Magnesium is recommended to help with sleep especially if you are experiencing cramps and restless legs.



Pelvic Pain Explained

Pelvic girdle pain is estimated to impact between 56%-72% of pregnant women. Pain can be felt in the middle of one or both buttocks or in the pubic bone. PPGP (pregnancy related pelvic girdle pain) can be a significant cause of disability, reduced quality of life, and early leave from work.

What are the common signs of PPGP?

Women will usually describe pain or discomfort with the following movements:

- Turning in bed
- Going from sitting to standing and taking the first few steps
- Getting out of a car
- Pushing heavy objects, like a shopping trolley or a Hoover
- Walking upstairs, or standing on one leg e.g. when putting on underwear
- Prolonged walking

Managing pelvic girdle pain:

Although pelvic girdle pain presents as a movement problem, the current evidence suggests it is also impacted by our central nervous system and the stress we may be dealing with in our lives. Therefore, we recommend addressing overall well-being and stress levels first. Consider your work & home life - is it stressful? What are you dealing with? What type of physical/emotional support do you have? Is there something you can put in place to help you reduce your stress?

Frequently this requires sharing with others about how this is impacting you and asking for help. Staying active with pelvic girdle pain really helps and you may have to modify what you do depending on your pain levels each day. Some days rest may be more important. You may have to limit certain activities like going up and down stairs and walking. Don't be afraid of your pain, remember that being sore doesn't mean you are causing damage. It can be due to the increased sensitivity in your tissues. Exercises while sitting on a gym ball can reduce impact on the pelvis.

Prioritise your sleep (see tips above in sleeping section)

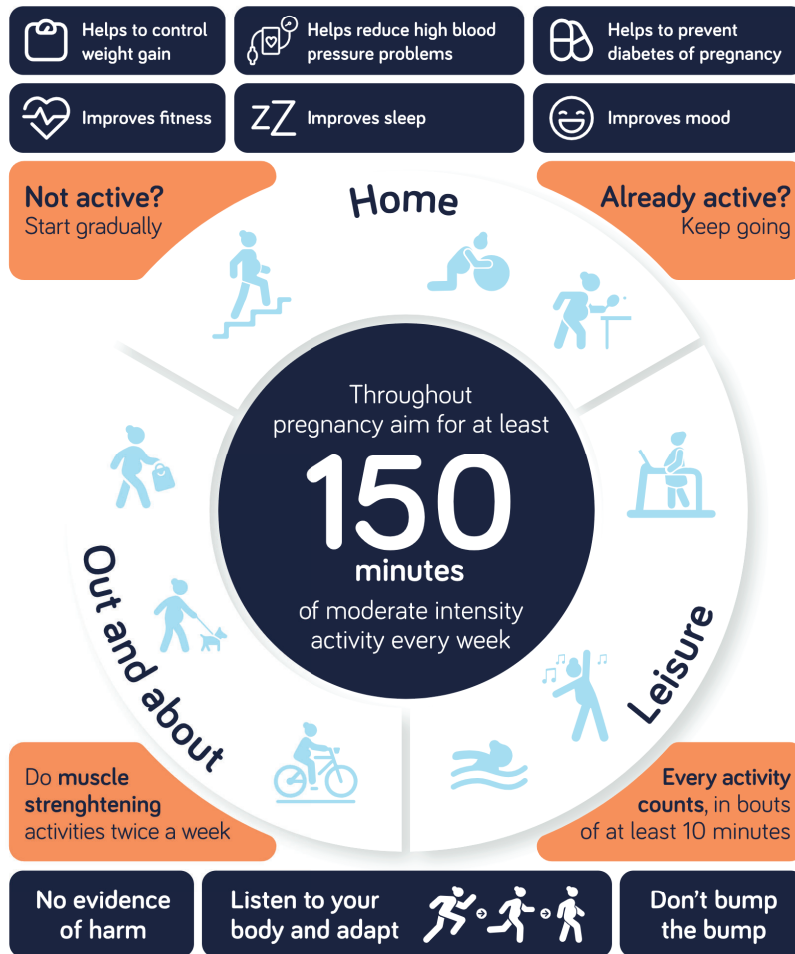
Unpack any previous negative birth experiences or a difficult pregnancy journey to get a sense of any sources of fear or anxiety. Consider talking to a counsellor to address these fears.

What can you do to unwind: spending time in nature, meditation, breathing, being with friends etc.

Tools that may help you with your pelvic girdle pain:

- SRC Health pregnancy leggings, these are compressive leggings that can help to support the pelvis
- Vibrating massage ball helps with muscle release around pelvis and lower back
- Mama turn is a brushed cotton-covered sliding sheet designed to make turning in bed a doddle!
- Satin pyjamas can make turning in bed more comfortable than cotton pjs

Exercise During Pregnancy



Physical inactivity is a risk factor for pregnancy complications. The most recent guidelines recommend that in uncomplicated pregnancy's all women should be active, regardless of their activity levels before their pregnancy. You should be aiming for 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercises weekly. This should include muscle-strengthening exercises at least twice a week. If only starting exercise aim for 15-20 mins daily and gradually progress to 30 minutes 5 days a week.



Types of Exercise

Classes specifically designed for pregnancy are ideal and a great way to connect with other pregnant women. The Active Pregnancy Foundation has more information on different types of exercises.

Squats



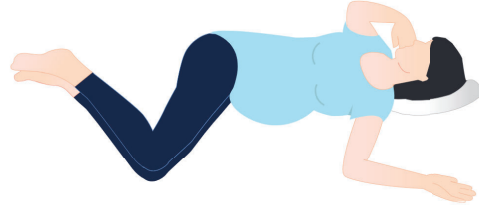
Pelvic tilts on ball/hands and knees



Exercises to help loosen your mid back



thread the needle



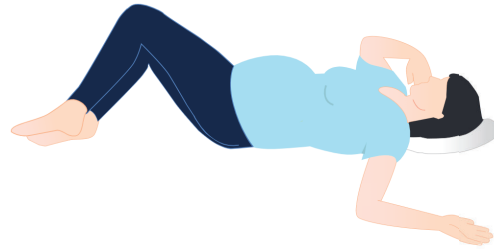
elbow openings

Heel raises standing



the calves/lower limb circulation

Knee rolls for lower back



Tips for exercising during pregnancy:

- Moderate intensity exercise – means staying within the limits of the 'talk test' when exercising. You should be able to talk but not sing during your exercise.
- Wear supportive footwear and a well-supporting maternity bra when exercising.
- Do what you enjoy, listen to your body and adapt!
- Stay hydrated.

Minor Pregnancy Concerns

Cramps can be more frequent in pregnancy especially at night. Stay hydrated and consider taking magnesium before going to bed. Ankle exercises like heel raises and calf stretches by pulling toes towards you can help.

Swollen ankles and varicose veins can be helped by elevating the legs and pumping the ankles for at least 30 seconds can help. Compression garments can also help especially if you are standing a lot.

Carpal tunnel symptoms – numb fingers can be caused by increased swelling in the wrist compressing the nerves. This can be worse at night so night splints and exercises with the wrist elevated and opening and closing the fingers can help.

Rib pain, the baby's position can cause pain under the ribs. Rib glides reaching upwards on each side helps to open the ribs and create space.

Stress and anxiety – women can experience stress/worry/anxiety in pregnancy for a number of reasons. Women who learn relaxation and use it in labour generally cope better with pain and feel more in control. During pregnancy, practicing relaxation will help you to rest more effectively and can also help you to get back to sleep again if you wake during the night. Try to have a session at least once a day. You can use relaxation apps like CALM app, breathing and gentle birthing. Exercise is a great stress reliever so a walk with a friend or listen to your favourite podcast.

Planning for the Future

Planning ahead can aid a smoother transition into motherhood.

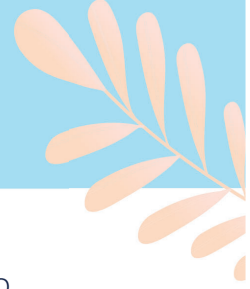
During pregnancy we can spend a lot of time planning for the birth, it is also important to prioritise planning for the early postnatal stage. The early weeks after baby has arrived is time for you to find your feet, feed your baby and fall in love! Ideally, someone else looks after everything else which requires planning.

Postpartum planning sets you up for success for an excellent recovery and to thrive in motherhood even with the wobbly moments!

Examples of things to consider planning include:

- What challenges are you going to come up against? Sleep deprivation, breastfeeding, no support?
- Who is going to do all the jobs that need to be done like housework etc?
- How will you ensure you get nourishing meals to aid your recovery?
Nutrition - meal trains, pantry stocked
- Physical healing - GP, PHN, Lactation Consultant, Women's Health Physio - have your postnatal care plan in place for if and when you need to call on them.
- Budgeting/finances - planning ahead will reduce money stress
- Family dynamics - other children - who will drop them to school/childcare?

Useful Sites



www.cso.ie/en/statistics/birthsdeathsandmarriages/

Central Statistics Office. This site lists the most popular babies' names registered with the CSO.

www.citizensinformation.ie/en/birth-family-relationships/

Information on public services available on a range of childcare issues from adoption, fostering, before and after baby is born, benefits and entitlements relating to birth.

www.rollercoaster.ie

www.welfare.ie

For the ups and downs of pregnancy and parenting.

The website of the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

Check out maternity and child benefit entitlements.

www.hse.ie/pregnancy-birth

HSE website with information about pregnancy and birth

www.nurturehealth.ie

Provides professional counselling support services to women & partners.

www.doula.ie

A community of professional birth and postpartum doulas which promotes, develops and supports the doula profession in Ireland.

www.doulacare.ie

Offering birth and postpartum doula support to families around Ireland.

www.thebumproom.ie

Physiotherapists with years of experience supporting, motivating and reassuring women in pregnancy, postnatal and motherhood.

www.activepregnancyfoundation.org

Supporting women to stay active throughout pregnancy and beyond.

www.srchealth.com

Compression garments for pelvic support.

www.stressnomore.co.uk

Website with information on pelvic floor health.

www.easiturn.com

Sleeping aid for pregnant mothers.

www.themummyphysios.com

Expert Womens Health Physiotherapists with specialised online programmes supporting women from pregnancy right through to a strong postnatal journey. Online support and guidance offered.

www.thepogp.co.uk/resources/

Valuable resources with specific educational booklets on various different Womens Health issues.

www.podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/celebrate-muliebrity-with-michelle-lyons/id1689238440

Celebrate Muliebrity with Michelle Lyons Podcast

Reputable podcast with evidence based and reliable information.

www.absolute.physio/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/returning-to-running-postnatal-guidelines.pdf

Return to running guidelines- an amazing resource to test your readiness to run.

www.gov.uk/maternity-allowance#:~:text=You%20can%20get%20Maternity%20Allowance,after%20the%20baby%20is%20born.

Maternity allowance info in UK

www.pandasfoundation.org.uk

Dedicated to support those affected with perinatal mental illness.

www.yesyesyes.org

Natural products for Vulva care.

For queries please call our freephone:



01225 751 098

Exercises and information are provided by The Bump Room, a team of physiotherapists who offer online and in-person pregnancy and postnatal classes.

For further information, the Bump Room website offers a range of free resources including classes to help manage pelvic girdle pain.

Also available
Planning for Postnatal Care



Attachments

Attachment