

# Care of the Body In Pregnancy Advice and Exercise



**Physiotherapy department**

The Care of the Body video can be accessed through this link:

<https://vimeo.com/428512117>



Pregnancy, childbirth and looking after a new baby are all physically demanding jobs so it is worthwhile paying a little extra attention to your health and fitness. It is safe to start a programme of gentle physical activity/exercise as long as there are no medical concerns. Even if you decide that exercise is not for you, there are some movements and advice in pregnancy that are helpful to follow.

## **Back care in pregnancy**

Low back pain affects 50% of pregnant women and pain in your pubic bone, groin and hips can affect approximately 20% of pregnancies.

This is usually linked to:

- Alterations in your posture as your bump grows, changing the pressures in your back and pelvic joints
- Uneven movement in the joints in your back or pelvis
- Previous back injury
- Weakness of your abdominal, buttocks, inner thighs, and pelvic floor muscles. These muscles are important to support the joints of your low back and pelvis

Occasionally the pain can be due to:

- The position of your baby
- Hormonal changes in pregnancy
- Growth spurts

For a very small number of women there will be a different cause for their pain which needs urgent medical attention. If you experience any of the following:

- Pain going down both legs at the same time
- Numbness in both legs at the same time
- Difficulty passing urine
- Leakage of stool from the bowel that you couldn't control

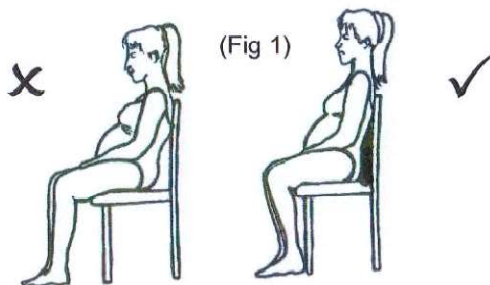
- Numbness around the vaginal or back passage

Call your GP straight away or go to your nearest A&E department.

## Positions of comfort

**Sitting:** Generally sitting with your hips higher than your knees is more comfortable. Sit well back in the chair making sure the lower back is supported (a small cushion or rolled towel may help with this). Your thighs should be supported by the chair and your feet should rest flat on the floor (Fig 1). Try and avoid crossing your legs or leaning to one side. There is no perfect posture – regular changes of position and movement are essential. Try to get up and move before your pain increases.

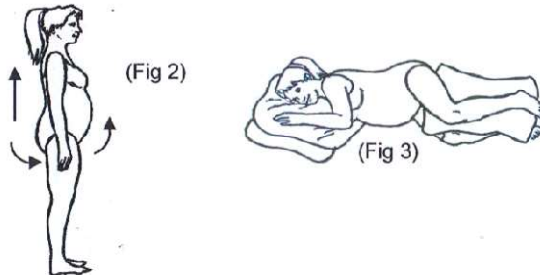
When getting into a car, sit on the seat and then bring both legs in together – reverse to get out.



- **Standing/on your feet:** Try not to stand for so long that your pain increases. Aim to break up and pace your activity into shorter blocks as much as possible. Take regular short breaks. Stand and walk tall by gently pulling in your abdominal muscles and tucking your tailbone under so that the curve in your lower back is not too deep. Hold your head

high with the chin tucked in and shoulders down and relaxed (Fig 2). Standing in one position for too long can lead to tiredness so make sure you keep moving and change positions regularly and try standing evenly on both feet. Doing too much on one leg can increase your discomfort.

If you have young children, try to limit carrying them on one hip.



**Lying:** From week 24 onwards you are advised to rest and sleep lying on your side. Don't worry if you wake up on your back - just turn onto your side again. You may be more comfortable with two pillows under your head and one under the top knee as in Fig 3. A small pillow or rolled towel under your bum to support it may aid comfort.

**Squatting** is a position some women may find useful during labour. If it is a position you hope to use, you need to build up the strength and endurance of your muscles in this position.

If you have pain concentrated at the front of your pelvis, you may not find this exercise a helpful exercise for you. Start practising as follows:

1. Hold onto something fixed and strong (such as the kitchen work surface). Stand with feet about half a metre apart with your toes turned out, then bend your knees keeping your heels on the floor.
2. Hold this position for a moment or two and then gradually increase the length of time as able. Try to do this exercise daily.

“Pregnancy related Pelvic girdle pain and low back pain during pregnancy and after having a baby” is a booklet produced by Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP) and provides further information. It is available from their website at [POGP \(thepogp.co.uk\)](http://POGP (thepogp.co.uk))

## **Exercise for relief and prevention of back and pelvic pain**

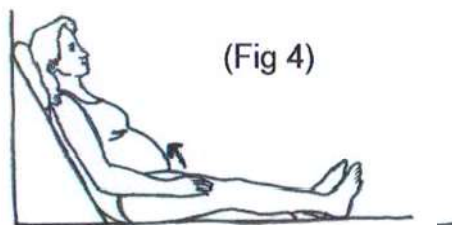
Sometimes starting new activity can cause some discomfort, but this should ease as your body gets used to it and if you build it up gradually. However, if your pain becomes consistently worse or you have any concerns about new symptoms you should ease back and discuss with your midwife, obstetric physiotherapist or GP.

The following exercises may help to relieve and prevent back pain during pregnancy. They can be done sitting on a chair, standing, kneeling on all fours, or side lying.

Once you get better at doing these exercises, you can try them on a gym ball. Don't worry if you do not have a gym ball, you will still benefit from these exercises.

### **Pelvic tilting**

In a sitting or standing position, pull in the lower abdominal muscles, tighten the muscles of the buttocks and press the small of the back into the support (Fig 4) e.g. the back of the chair or the wall (if standing). Hold for a count of five, breathing normally and then relax. Repeat five times. Try to do this exercise regularly through the day. This exercise can also be performed as a more gentle rocking movement for a few seconds rather than as a hold.

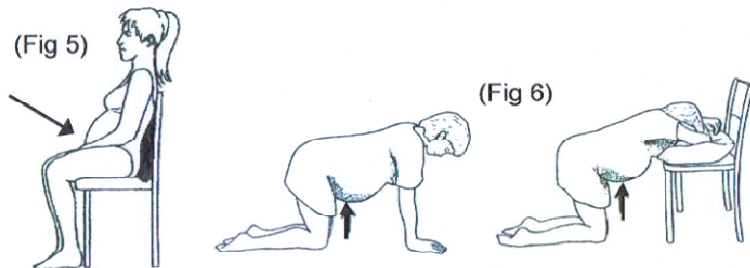


For the side lying position, keep your hips and knees bent. Gently pull in the lower abdominal muscles, flatten the lower back and tighten your buttocks.

## Abdominal muscles

This exercise is a good way to keep your abdominal muscles stronger during pregnancy, helping to support your back and pelvis.

While sitting, place your hands under the weight of baby (Fig 5), take a gentle breath in and as you breathe out, draw your lower abdominal muscles in towards you, lifting the weight of baby from your hands. Repeat five times. Try to do this exercise several times a day.

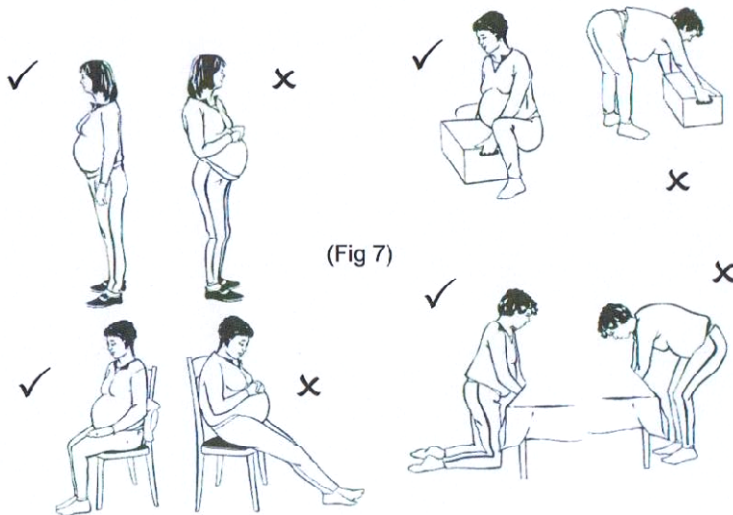


You may find it easier to do this exercise in a forward kneeling position (Fig 6). Start with your back in a flat position, draw in the lower abdominal muscles, lifting the baby up towards the spine, hold for five seconds and then gently relax. In this exercise, you do not need to move/tilt the pelvis. If kneeling on all fours is uncomfortable try supporting your forearms by leaning on a chair, bed or gym ball.

Your abdominal muscles will stretch naturally as your baby grows. The exercises above are the most appropriate abdominal exercises in pregnancy.

To get up from a lying down position; try bending your knees, keeping them together and tighten your buttocks and abdominal muscles. Then roll onto your side and push up into a sitting position using your arms. Reverse this to lie down.

Avoid heavy lifting and use good positioning when you do lift a load (Fig 7). This is important at work as well as when doing household jobs.



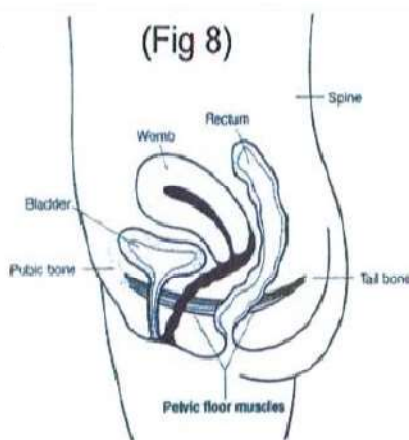
## Pelvic floor muscles

These are the main support muscles on the floor of the pelvis (Fig 8) and are very important during pregnancy, labour and the postnatal months. They assist with bladder and bowel control and prevent prolapse (when the organs in the pelvis move from their normal position).

Start practising working these muscles so that you know how to use them during labour and after the birth.

## How to exercise your pelvic floor:

- Imagine that you are trying to stop passing wind by drawing in the back passage
- At the same time imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine. You should feel a 'squeeze and lift' or 'scoop' from back to front
- Try to hold this contraction for a few seconds and then relax completely
- You should not feel your buttocks or legs tightening or hold your breath
- Gradually work up to holding for 10 seconds, doing 10 in a row
- Please also try to do quick contractions with no hold, building up to 10 repetitions
- Try to repeat this three to four times a day until you reach this target. You can then reduce to once a day to maintain your strength.
- Before you cough, sneeze or lift, try to tighten the pelvic floor muscles. This is called the 'knack'. This will reduce strain on your pelvis and minimise leakage of urine.



Like all exercise programmes, it takes time to see results and it's important to stick with it.

Below is a short video link on how to perform your pelvic floor exercise:

<https://vimeo.com/593193863/674bdd1458>



You may find the 'NHS Squeezy' app helpful to remind you to do your exercises and help to strengthen your pelvic floor. More information is available at [www.squeezyapp.com](http://www.squeezyapp.com)



## General physical activity

It is good for you to continue with most of your usual sports and activities if you have had no medical problems with your pregnancy. Some activities can irritate joints due to changes in your body during pregnancy so you should avoid taking up new strenuous exercises.

NHS Wales have produced a helpful guide about the benefits of activity in pregnancy and can be found using the following link:

<https://111.wales.nhs.uk/livewell/pregnancy/Exercise/>



## Benefits of physical activity during pregnancy

- Strengthens muscles in preparation for labour and helps you carry the increased load of pregnancy
- Can help to decrease back pain
- Increases awareness of your posture and importance of movement
- Improves co-ordination and balance
- Improves awareness of normal breathing
- Introduces relaxation techniques and helps with sleep
- Improves your mood

- Improves fitness – endurance and stamina
- Improves circulation
- Helps to prevent excessive weight gain
- Helps to prevent diabetes in pregnancy
- Helps to keep bowels moving and reduce the likelihood of constipation which can often result in haemorrhoids (piles)
- Can help to speed up postnatal recovery and a return to normal exercise levels.

### **Guidelines for physical activity/exercise in pregnancy**

- If you are unsure whether it is safe to commence an exercise programme, consult your GP, obstetric physiotherapist or midwife
- Gradually increase your physical activity if you were previously not very active
- Exercise regularly. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity every week (e.g. exercise for 30 minutes on 5 days of the week). Moderate intensity means that you aim to work at a rate where you are breathing harder but still able to speak in sentences
- Low impact exercise is preferable
- Avoid overheating and exercising in hot conditions
- Ensure adequate warm up and cool down periods
- Maintain adequate fluid intake to avoid dehydration
- Do not exercise if you have a fever

- Avoid exercising flat on your back after 16 weeks
- Avoid contact sports after 16 weeks (e.g. judo, karate, hockey) due to the risk of a hit to the abdomen
- Avoid scuba diving due to the pressure changes and changes in oxygen and carbon dioxide levels
- Take care with sports/activities such as skiing or horse riding due to the risk of falling
- Ensure you wear a supportive bra and shoes
- Always listen to your body and adapt as your pregnancy progresses.

## **Sports which can be undertaken if you have no problems with the pregnancy:**

### **Gym exercise**

If you are already a member of a gym and regularly exercise ask your qualified fitness instructor to work out a suitable programme for you. Avoid using any equipment where you are required to lie on your back for a prolonged period of time.

### **Cycling**

Generally cycling is a good form of exercise as the saddle is helping to support your body weight. A stationary or exercise bike is safer as your balance is altered as the baby grows.

### **Walking**

Try to walk a little every day. As your pregnancy progresses you may have to reduce the distance covered or give yourself more time to reach your destination. If you have pain in your pelvic joints you might find shorter walks, with a shorter stride, more comfortable.

## **Jogging**

If you are already a regular runner, it is safe to continue to do so. You may need to adapt your distance, intensity, and speed, particularly as you progress through your pregnancy.

## **Aerobics**

Aerobics should be lower impact and preferably in a specialised pregnancy session. If you are attending a general class, let the instructor know you are pregnant so the exercise can be adapted if required. Remember that warm-up and cool-down is important.

## **Pilates, yoga and tai-chi**

These can increase body awareness with breathing techniques and gentle stretches. The use of chairs and pillows for extra support is recommended. A class designed for pregnancy would be best. Any position which could not be achieved before pregnancy should not be performed. Be mindful of discomfort at the front of the pelvis and speak to your instructor as exercise/position may need to be adapted.

## **Swimming**

Swimming is generally a good form of physical activity. However, spas and saunas should be avoided due to the risk of overheating. The buoyancy of the water supports your increasing body weight and helps to protect joints and muscles from injury, enabling you to continue moving with this excellent toning and strengthening activity. If you are a regular swimmer, and if no medical problems exist with the pregnancy, you should be encouraged to continue with your normal routine, adapting strokes and the distance of your swims to your advancing pregnancy. Sometimes the “frog-like” action of the legs with the breast stroke can irritate the pelvis. If so, try the leg action used in the crawl. Avoid swimming/floating on your back. Walking in the pool can be a good alternative if swimming itself is uncomfortable.

## Leg care

Changes in circulation during pregnancy can result in aching legs, leg cramp, varicose veins or swelling.

These simple leg exercises help to reduce these problems:

- Bend feet up and down at ankles
- Circle ankles 10 times each way
- Rise up and down on your toes, raising your heels off the floor 20 times. Hold onto something solid to help with your balance
- Massaging the calf muscles. Be cautious with pressure over varicose veins.

Repeat these exercises at regular intervals throughout the day.

You should avoid standing for prolonged periods; sit with legs up and supported when possible. Support tights/stockings can also help. You should avoid hot baths.

## Numb fingers

This may be a problem first thing in the morning or through the night and is due to extra fluid in the body increasing the pressure at the wrist. You might find wearing wrist supports at night may solve the problem. Elevating your forearm on a pillow, using ice carefully and moving your wrist regularly can help.

**Note:** If swollen ankles and/or fingers are accompanied by puffy face, headaches or seeing flashing lights - you must seek medical advice at once as this could be a sign of pre-eclampsia.

## Rib Pain

This problem is usually more troublesome in the third trimester and is due to the growing baby pushing the ribs out to the side. Try to change positions frequently and avoid sitting on low chairs

and other positions which bring your ribs close to your pelvis, which can reduce the space available for your bump. You may get temporary relief by lifting the arm on the affected side and bending sideways away from the ache. Sitting for a few minutes with your hands on your head also gives some relief. With arms raised, try taking 2-3 breaths in and out to assist with expansion of your ribs.

## **Emotional changes**

The hormone changes in pregnancy lead to emotional “ups and downs” and sometimes forgetfulness. After the birth these problems will gradually get better. Regular physical activity can help to lift your mood.

You should seek support from you from your midwife or GP if your low mood is concerning you.

## **Stress, tension and relaxation**

During pregnancy some women feel extremely tired, while others develop aches and pains which can be related to tension. Tension causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate and rate of breathing which can lead to feelings of panic as well as overloading the systems of the body. Knowing how to prevent tension is a valuable skill. Learning a relaxation technique and using it regularly has been shown to help to reduce increased blood pressure.

Women who learn relaxation and use it in labour generally cope better with pain and feel more in control. During pregnancy, practising 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 practising relaxation.

‘The Mitchell method of physiological relaxation – a simple technique suitable for all’ – produced by Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy and is available through their

website in the patient information section at: [POGP \(thepogp.co.uk\)](http://thepogp.co.uk)

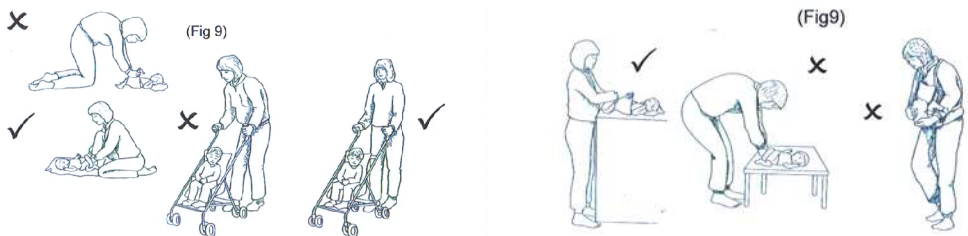
## Baby bathing

Another source of back pain can be bath time. Try to avoid using baby baths which have to be lifted and lowered when full of water. Baby baths are available that can rest over a large bath tub so that you can kneel alongside. They can be filled directly from bath taps and emptied into the bath by pulling out a plug. Alternatively you could use a clean bathroom or kitchen sink.

## Equipment

It is important that you think about baby equipment before you buy it. Back problems often occur after the birth from poor choice of equipment and posture. Try to think about good positioning while feeding your baby, changing nappies and bathing your baby. Correct heights for cots, prams, slings, changing mats, baths or buggy handles are essential and should be considered when deciding on equipment (Fig 9).

There are many different types of slings available. You should try before you buy to ensure you get the one most comfortable for you and your baby.



This leaflet should be used in conjunction with the Care of the Body in Pregnancy video: <https://vimeo.com/428512117>. If you are having back or pelvic pain, please work through the exercises and advice contained within this leaflet before considering a referral to physiotherapy. It can take a few weeks of following this advice before your symptoms ease.

It is important to ask for help if your pain does not improve with the advice given in this leaflet or you are struggling to sleep or do your daily activity. Speak to your midwife or GP initially, however you may benefit from attending our pregnancy class or, if required, a one-to-one appointment with an obstetric physiotherapist.

You can access physiotherapy via your GP or midwife. You can also complete an antenatal and postnatal self referral form. This can be accessed via NHS Lothian internet site.

**For West Lothian patients:**

For further information call 0131 536 1060 (option 3) Monday – Friday 08:30-13:30 and request to speak to one of the obstetric physiotherapists.

**For Royal Infirmary Edinburgh patients:**

For further information call 0131 242 1945 Monday, Tuesday 09:30–11:30, Thursday, Friday 13:00–14:00.

This leaflet was compiled by St John’s Hospital Physiotherapy Department.

The leaflet can be made available in Braille and other languages. Please contact the physiotherapy department on **01506 522063** for further information.