



Guide to postnatal exercises during the postpartum period

Information provided by the physical therapy department



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Preface

The early postpartum period lasts until the 10th day after the birth and should be accompanied by help and advice from an aftercare midwife.

After the birth of your child, the muscular balance between the stomach and pelvic floor is often disturbed. Due to your stomach muscles being overstretched during pregnancy and your pelvic floor muscles being excessively strained during the birth, both muscle groups have reduced functionality at first. As a result, the conscious feeling of tension in these muscles may have waned in the first few hours and days after the birth. Sometimes there may even be momentary weaknesses of the bladder and bowel.

Movement exercises during the early postpartum period help the normal recovery processes if you slowly build up from easy to difficult exercises. Strenuous “keep-fit” exercises straight after birth often have the opposite effect. For the late postpartum period – from the 10th day after the birth – you should then join a postnatal group led by a physiotherapist or midwife in order to sensibly increase the exercises.

This short guide to postnatal exercises during the postpartum period is divided into four groups of exercises. From these groups of exercises, you should select the exercises that do not overexert you and that you find fun, bearing in mind the information regarding the earliest possible starting date for the exercises.



Bear the following information in mind

- All exercises marked with * are selected for the early postpartum period, but are also suitable for the later period.
- Start to do the exercises on the day after the birth of your child.
- Exercise regularly, several times a day on a flat surface (a small cushion is allowed).
- Exercise slowly and concentrate on what you are doing.
- Ensure that the room is well ventilated.
- Remove tight items of clothing whilst exercising.
- Empty your bladder and bowel beforehand.
- Do not exercise immediately before breast-feeding; the breasts should be emptied from feeding.
- Always get up from lying on your back by turning sideways into a sitting/standing position.

1st Exercise group

Exercises to prevent thrombosis
(starting on the 1st day after the birth)

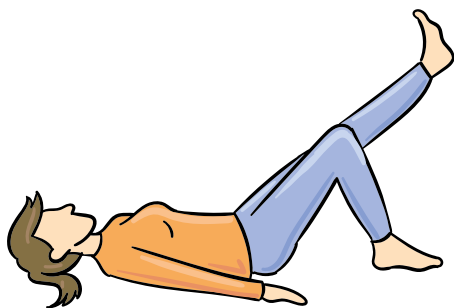


Figure 1*

Activating the “calf muscle pump” as part of vascular training should be performed several times a day. Start by lying on your back and raise both legs (Figure 1). Always stretch the leg being exercised (right/left) so that both knees are at the same height and pressed lightly together. Curl and stretch your toes 10 times slowly and forcefully.

Then swap legs. Then assume start position for right leg. Move your foot up and down from the ankle 10 times slowly and forcefully. Then swap legs and exercise with your left foot. Or both legs remained stretched out and you lift both feet up (from the ankle) simultaneously and push forcefully against the foot board of your bed.

10 times, then a short break and repeat.

Notice

Support stockings will help any new mother who has varicose veins or pains in her legs.

2nd Exercise group

Practising abdominal breathing, activating the lower abdomen (starting on the 1st day after the birth)



Figure 2*

Start by lying on your back with raised legs (Figure 2). Place your hands spread without pressure on the lower abdomen.

Let the air flow into your abdomen through the nose and slowly out of your mouth with a quiet “haa” sound. Whilst inhaling, your abdomen lifts up gently towards your hands, whilst exhaling it drops back down. After that, try to pull your pubic bone towards your navel whilst breathing out. The distance between the pubic bone and navel becomes smaller and the muscles in your abdomen tighten.



Figure 3*

Then turn onto your side (Figure 3). Your head, chest and pelvis are in a line, with your legs bent. Try again, whilst breathing out slowly through the mouth, to pull your pubic bone towards your

navel. Your hand resting on top checks the inhaling expansion and exhaling contraction of your abdomen. Your abdomen and pelvic floor will be strengthened if you breathe out slowly with a “pff” or “pooh” whilst imagining that your abdomen is being squeezed out “like a sponge”.

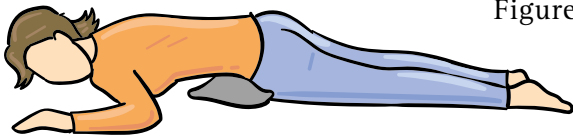


Figure 4*

Now lie on your stomach. Before doing so, place a firm cushion under your lower abdomen. Your chest should not be pushed (Figure 4). You should now also breathe in down to the abdominal area. Breathing out through your mouth with a “haa”, “pooh” or “pff”, pull your pubic bone towards your navel again. Notice how the pubic bone presses increasingly into support beneath it.

3rd Exercise group

Notice

Be aware of your pelvic floor and exercise it carefully. Use with compressive stress.

The job of the pelvic floor muscles is to support your internal abdominal organs – womb, bladder, bowel – and close them at the bottom. The only openings, surrounded by sphincter muscles, are the urethra, vagina and rectum. During the birth, the part of the baby coming out first stretches and widens the basket-shaped pelvic floor. After the

birth this needs a recovery period, as the muscles are nearly always overstrained when the baby comes out. Minor injuries to the muscle or to its attachment points have to first heal again, as does the externally visible perineal suture if the baby was unable to be born without this aid to expand the perineum.

During the early postpartum period until the wound heals, no exercise must therefore be performed that is intended to vigorously strengthen the pelvic floor. One exception: Before heavy coughing or sneezing as a way of relieving pressure and pain, form a gentle image in your mind: your vagina and anal opening are each gently “swallowing” a “suppository” and holding these whilst you have to cough or sneeze or want to laugh out loud.

Consciously getting to know and be aware of your pelvic floor is the prerequisite for all subsequent pelvic floor exercises. For this purpose, your first starting position may be sitting in bed whilst reclining or lying on your side. Try to “wink” the pelvic floor muscles enclosing the anus, vagina and urethra like your eyes can. Once you are able to do this, “blink” with this invisible pelvic floor exercise in every starting position and at every opportunity.

Only when you notice how the muscles in your pelvic floor move, add another mind exercise: “wink” with the tip of your tailbone to your pubic bone. This “invisible” wink can also be helpful if you have haemorrhoids.

Another exercise of the mind for the pelvic floor, which you can start at the end of the early postpartum period, is the “sea anemone”: Move – grip – release. Rhythmic – gentle – harmonious. Your pelvic floor can do all this. Try it out and see whether you can do it. Your jaw joints will move at the same time, so just let this to happen. The main thing: always make sure that your bottom jaw and also your tongue in your mouth are inwardly “ready to yawn”. This has a favourable effect on your breathing and your “composure”.

The “pelvic floor lift exercise” can help you every day in all starting positions (sitting, standing, lying on your side/stomach) to regain your full pelvic floor holding function during the later postpartum period. By imagining that you are slowly pushing your pelvic floor like a lift through several levels up and back down again, you will help the holding power and blood flow of your pelvic floor muscles. When “riding the lift”, never hold your breath but continue to breathe calmly.

From now on you can repeatedly check, no matter in which situation, whether your pelvic floor provides hold from below or is weak down there. Passing urine involuntarily is not rare either when put under such strains during the postpartum period.

In case of all compressive strains down below, pull your tailbone towards your pubic bone (“wink”) and your pubic bone towards your navel or think about “swallowing a suppository” as described above.

Notice

Any incorrect loading or overloading will be harmful to your weakened pelvic floor.

4th Exercise group

Notice

Abdominal breathing and tightening of the pelvic floor are complemented by stomach muscle exercises. Please bear in mind: all the following stomach muscle exercises are started by breathing out whilst gently tightening the pelvic floor.

1st Exercise

Start by lying on your side (Figure 5): Your head, chest and pelvis are in a line, with your knees bent. Your bent lower arm rests under your head. Close your top hand to make a fist and place this fist in front of you on the surface underneath you on at navel height.

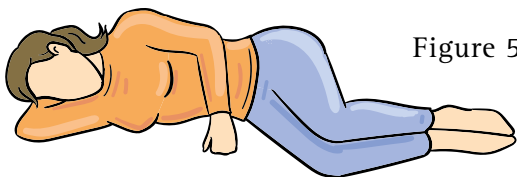


Figure 5*

Start by lying on your side (Figure 5): Your head, chest and pelvis are in a line, with your knees bent. Your bent lower arm rests under your head. Close your top hand to make a fist and place this fist in front of you on the surface underneath you on at navel height.

Whilst shortening the distance between pubic bone and navel, exhaling audibly, and at the same time gently pulling in your anus and vagina, your fist should push gently at first, then increasingly firmly into the surface underneath you.

Notice how your stomach muscles, especially those on the bottom side of the stomach, tighten more and more. Exercise on the other side too.

2nd Exercise

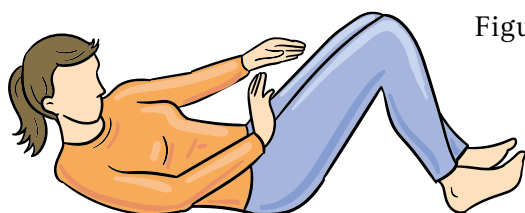


Figure 6

Start by lying on your back (Figure 6): Legs raised bent, tips of the feet pulled up towards the knees. Whilst increasing the pressure of your heels on the floor and exhaling (mouth), at the same time pulling your pubic bone towards your navel, both raised hands press to the right (left) side of your body.

Lift your head at the same time in the direction of the movement. Your back and your heels must not lose contact with the surface underneath you. Your thoracic spine stays straight, the upper abdomen stays slim.

3rd Exercise

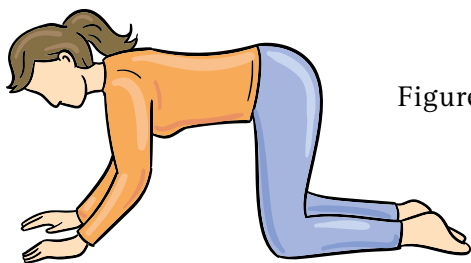


Figure 7*

Start in the all-fours position – this is also possible in bed (Figure 7): Your head, upper body and pelvis are in a line.

Your back and stomach should not sag down. There is a slight gap between the knees. Whilst pulling your pubic bone towards your navel and breathing out, you briefly increase the pressure from your right hand and left knee to the surface underneath you.

Then swap the pressure to the left hand and right knee. Allow yourself short breaks when repeating this exercise several times in each diagonal.

4th Exercise

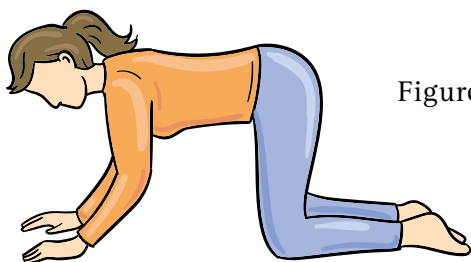


Figure 8

A strenuous but effective exercise for the later postpartum period. Start in the all-fours position (Figure 8): Open your knees and feet to around shoulder width, the arches of the feet rest flat on the surface underneath you. Whilst breathing out, lift, as much as possible, your knees off the floor.

The spine remains straight. The weight of your body now only rests on your hands and feet arches.

5th Exercise

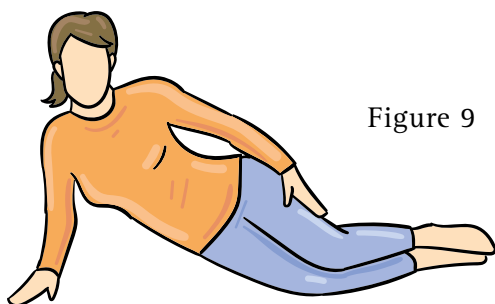


Figure 9

Start by lying on your side (Fig. 9): The knees are bent. Your top arm rests loosely stretched out on your body, the lower arm is propped up.

Whilst pulling your pubic bone towards your navel and breathing out, lift up your pelvis supported on your knee and lower arm.

Do not hollow your back whilst doing so. (Figure 10) Your abdomen should pull in, it must not push outwards. You should train the side that gives you the most trouble when pushing up more often.

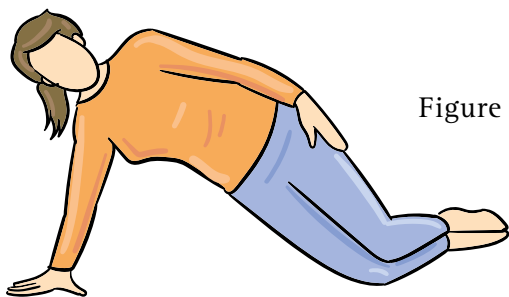


Figure 10

6th Exercise

Stabilisation for stomach and back muscles. Starting position (Figure 11):

Stand with your face facing a wall. Your feet rest on the floor at hips width apart, your knees are slightly bent. Both your lower arms rest on the wall at shoulder width. The spine remains straight. Whilst slowly breathing out with a “haa”, “pff” or “pooh”, you imagine both elbows pulling towards your navel.

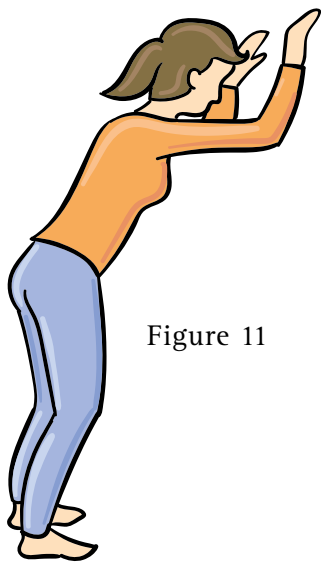


Figure 11

Variation: Whilst breathing out (see above), pull your right/left elbow and left/right knee towards your navel.

The spine remains straight. During both exercises, do not allow your body to move.

As a reminder, note the following advice

- When coughing, sneezing, laughing and lifting and carrying, apply resistance to your pelvic floor.
- Carry all weights (load) close to your body.
- Carry your baby at the side.
- Always go from lying to sitting on your side and also lying down.
- A familiar sporting activity can be resumed once the pelvic floor has its full holding function again.

Postnatal exercise

Dates on request.

Registration and information

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