

POST BIRTH

Pelvic Floor Guide

The purpose of this guide is to:

1. Explain what the pelvic floor muscles are
2. Give you tips on how to recover post birth
3. Provide information on why and how you can reach out to a pelvic floor physical therapist

RECOVERY AFTER BIRTH

Every birth and recovery time is different. No matter how your labour and delivery goes, your body will need time to heal after giving birth.¹ Some common symptoms 6-8 weeks postpartum are¹:

- Vaginal bleeding
- Cramping
- Pain in your back, neck or joints
- Pain in your perineum (area between your vagina and anus)
- Pain around your incision (if you had a cesarean birth)
- Swollen breasts
- Bladder problems
- Bowel problems
- Hemorrhoids

Each person's healing time will be different. Some births will require longer healing time, for example, a c-section, use of vacuum or forceps during a vaginal birth, or a large tear. It is ok if you have a different healing time than someone else.

PELVIC FLOOR PHYSIOTHERAPY

When to seek pelvic physiotherapy

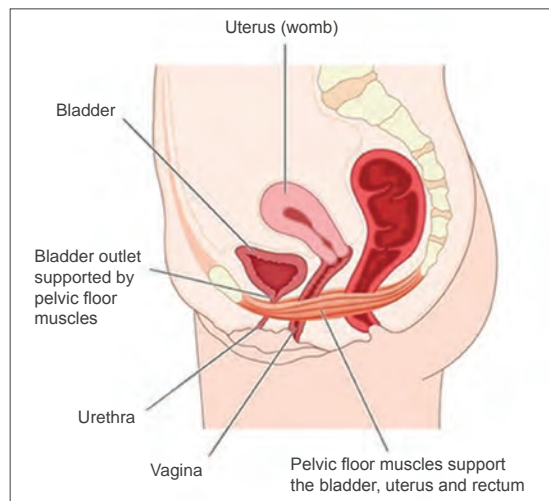
- If you want professional support for exercising or returning to movement
- If you have urinary or fecal incontinence (leaking urine or stool) that continues more than 6-8 weeks after birth
- If you have a feeling of heaviness, pressure or bulging in your vagina or rectum
- If the pain in your pelvis or lower back, pain with intercourse or heavy pressure is present more than 6-8 weeks after birth
- If you are having difficulty with your daily activities due to pain, leakage, pressure or any other symptoms that concern you
- **See last page of this handout for local Physical Therapists trained in Pelvic Floor physio**

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

The pelvic floor is made up of layers of muscles located in the pelvis around the vagina and rectum. They have four main functions:

1. To support the pelvic organs (bladder, uterus and bowel)
2. Maintain and control continence (any unintentional loss of bladder or bowel control)
3. Provide stability to our spine and pelvic area
4. Allow normal sexual function and satisfaction

Pregnancy and child birth can strain and stretch the muscles of the pelvic floor. Just like any other muscle injury, typical healing time is about 6 weeks but you may need more support, time or professional help to recover fully.



HELPING YOUR RECOVERY

All persons who have given birth can benefit from the following tips in the first 6 weeks postpartum or longer if needed.

1. Getting rest

Rest your body when you feel tired. Some ways to promote comfort can include:

- Lying down on your side or back when able. This might help manage pressure, swelling and pain in your pelvis and perineum
- Rest in bed with your feet raised up on pillows. You can also do this on the couch with your feet up on the arm rest, or on the floor with your calves on a stool or chair
- Get in and out of bed from your side. Place a pillow between your legs when laying down, roll to your side and push up into sitting using your arms.



2. Pain Control with Ice

- Apply ice to the perineum (area between your anus and vagina) for 10-15 minutes, 2-3 times a day in the first 72 hours post birth
- Always wrap ice in a layer of towel or cloth. Do not apply ice directly to the skin
- Ice can help reduce pain and swelling

3. Gentle Movement

- If you had a vaginal delivery with no complications, you may be able to resume regular activity within a few days after birth
- If you had a c-section or complications during delivery, check with your doctor for timelines for resuming activity
- You will likely have to limit yourself by doing no heavy lifting, pushing, pulling, or strenuous activity. This includes lifting the car seat and most household chores
- Walking is a safe and easy way to slowly begin moving more, no matter the delivery. Start with walking around in your house. Increase the distance as you feel able
- Basic pelvic floor exercises can be started right away (see suggested exercises in next section)

4. Managing Constipation

- Reduce straining during bowel movements by eating high fiber foods and drinking lots of water
- Reduce pressure during bowel movements
- Focus on relaxing the pelvic muscles during voiding by using deep breathing or blowing through a closed fist
- If you have had a third or fourth degree tear, put pressure with a cold cloth on your vaginal area when you have bowel movement
- Talk to your doctor, dietitian or pharmacist regarding supplements or diet changes to help control bowel movements

RETURNING TO ACTIVITY

Movement is safe and healthy for you after pregnancy. It can help improve energy levels, manage pain, improve mood, lessen stress and help your pelvic floor muscles recover.²

Stages of Recovery




There are 3 general stages of recovery following birth. Timelines between these stages will look different for each person.

- Recovery
- Increasing activity
- Returning to regular activity

SUGGESTED EXERCISES FOR RECOVERY

Exercise	What to Do	How Many Times	Picture
Deep Breathing	Breathe in and feel your ribs expand at your sides and back. Then breathe out slowly (try to count to 4).	Do this 3 - 4 times, at least 4 times a day; can do up to every hour.	
Pelvic Floor Activation – Lying	Lay on your back with your knees bent. To engage your pelvic floor, imagine you are slowing a stream of urine or holding in a fart. Do not hold your breath. Try to keep your stomach and thighs relaxed.	5 - 10 times (in lying), 3 - 4 times a day. After a few weeks, you can try to progress to holding for 4 - 5 seconds.	
Ankle Pumps	Bend and stretch your feet at the ankles (feel a stretch behind your calf).	10 - 20 times, at least 3 times a day, up to every hour.	
Foot Circles	Circle your feet at the ankles. Repeat in the other direction.	10 - 20 times, at least 3 times a day, up to every hour	
Pelvic Tilt	Lay on your back with your knees bent. Tilt your pelvis back to flatten the curve in your low back.	10 times, every day.	 <p>© Mayo Foundation for Medical Education & Research. All rights reserved.</p>

SUGGESTED EXERCISES FOR INCREASING ACTIVITY

Exercise	What to Do	How Many Times	Picture
Pelvic Floor Activation – Sitting	Engage your pelvic floor by imagining you are slowing a stream of urine or holding in a fart. If this is too difficult, you can continue doing this exercise lying down.	5 - 10 times, 3 - 4 times a day. Try holding for 4 - 5 seconds.	
Heel Slides	Lay on your back with your knees bent, perform a pelvic tilt, Slide one heel slowly out, straightening the knee. Slowly draw the knee back in and repeat on the other side. Make sure you can keep breathing throughout this movement and maintain the pelvic tilt position.	5 - 10 per side, up to 3 times a day.	
Knee Fall-Out	Lay on your back with your knees bent. Perform a pelvic tilt and slowly lower one knee out to the side about halfway to the floor, and then bring back to the start position. Repeat on the other leg. Make sure you can keep breathing throughout this movement and maintain the pelvic tilt position.	5 - 10 per side, up to 3 times a day.	
Marching	Lay on your back with your knees bent. Perform a pelvic tilt, then slowly and with control lift one foot from the floor. Slowly lower and repeat on the other side. Make sure you can keep breathing throughout this movement and maintain the pelvic tilt position.	5 - 10 per side, up to 3 times a day.	

SUGGESTED EXERCISES FOR RETURNING TO REGULAR ACTIVITY

Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercise is a repetitive structured activity that increases your heart rate and breathing rate. Some examples are walking, cycling, swimming, jogging, dancing and more.

Walking

As you return to regular activity, walking is a safe form of cardio to begin early after birth or when you feel able. Increase the amount of time and distance until you can walk 20-30 minutes at a low intensity (you can easily talk while exercising). Gradually, you can increase the intensity to moderate, building up to 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic exercise (you are able to speak but not sing).

Moderate to Vigorous Intensity Aerobic Exercise

When you are able to do 30 minutes of walking without any symptoms you can introduce more moderate aerobic activities (e.g., hiking, dancing, swimming, jogging, aerobic classes). Usually, it is recommended that you wait 8 weeks after birth to begin moderate exercise. This can vary based on your recovery and level of exercise you did prior to pregnancy. Do not start to progress to moderate activity if you experience the following during walking:

- pain
- feeling of heaviness in your pelvis
- leaking of urine

If you are interested in jogging, start slowly. Introduce less than 60 seconds of jogging at a time, followed by at least 120 seconds of walking. Increase slowly. You should still be able to hold a conversation during the jogging periods.

Resistance Exercise

Resistance exercise strengthens muscles when working against a weight or force (e.g., body weight, hand weights, bands). Avoid holding your breath when performing any exercises. A general timeline after birth for resistance exercises is below:

- 4-6 weeks can start body weight strength exercises (e.g., gentle squats, lunges)
- 6-8 weeks can start loaded strength exercises (e.g., adding weights)
- 9-12 weeks can start to progress to higher intensity and impact activities bases on your goal (e.g., jumping)

WHO TO CONTACT

Physiotherapists trained in Pelvic Floor physio, doctor referral not needed, public health:

Location	Hospital	Contact Information
Prince George	University Hospital of Northern B.C.	P 250.565.2581
Daajing Giids, Haida Gwaii	Haida Gwaii Hospital and Health Centre – Xaayda Gwaay Ngaaysdll Naay	P 250.559.4919
Prince Rupert	Prince Rupert General Hospital	P 250.622.6174
Kitimat	Kitimat General Hospital	P 250.632.8331
Pacific Postpartum Society	Non-profit society	Call or text for support: P 604.255.7999 Call Toll-free: P 855.255.7999 Website: Postpartum.org

Physiotherapists trained in Pelvic Floor physio, doctor referral not needed, private pay:

Location	Clinic Name	Contact Information
Dawson Creek	Deep Physio	P 250.782.3676
Fort St. John	Fort St. John Physiotherapy	P 250.785.1175
Prince George	Phoenix Physiotherapy Clinic	P 250.562.8248
Prince Rupert	Mountain Coast Physiotherapy	P 778.834.5263
Smithers	Trillium Integrative Health Centre	P 778.640.1119
Terrace	Cedar River Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Centre	P 250.638.1010
Virtual Physiotherapy	Various	bcphysio.org/find-a-physio (search by “women’s health” in the “area of practice” drop down menu)

REFERENCES

1. “Exercise After Pregnancy”. *Acog.org*, Aug. 2022, [acog.org/womens-health/faqs/exercise-after-pregnancy](https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/exercise-after-pregnancy)
2. “For During and After Pregnancy: Find Your Way to Move” *Health.gov*, 29 May, 2023, [health.gov/moveyourway#during-after-pregnancy](https://www.health.gov/moveyourway#during-after-pregnancy)
3. Pelvic Health Fundamentals Workbook, Anniken Chadwick 2022