



A guide to early postpartum pelvic floor health

Information for Northern BC families and health care providers

IN THIS GUIDE

Key takeaways	2
Using QR codes	2
Acknowledgements and commitments	3
Introduction	4
• Pelvic floor muscles	4
Postpartum healing takes time	5
• Vaginal birth	5
• C-section birth	5
Gentle exercises to try right after birth	6
Tips to help postpartum recovery	7
Returning to activity	8
Exercise guide	9
How to contact a physical therapist	13
Additional resources	14
Important contact information	14
References	14



- Every birth is different. Healing is a journey, not a race.
- Movement is safe and healthy after pregnancy for most postpartum parents.
- Exercise, along with rest and medications, is an important part of a parent's healing after birth.
- Pelvic floor physical therapy can help.

Using QR codes

In this guide, we use QR codes to link to websites and resources. Here are steps to help you:



- Step 1:** Open the Camera App from your mobile device (either on the home screen, control centre, or lock screen).
- Step 2:** Hold your device so the QR code opens in the viewfinder and wait until you see a notification pop up with a link.
- Step 3:** Click on the notification to open the link associated with the QR code.

Acknowledgements and commitments

TERRITORY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Northern Health (NH) acknowledges with gratitude that our work takes place on the territories of the Tlingit, Tahltan, Nisga’a, Gitksan, Tsimshian, Haisla, Haida, Wet’suwet’en, Carrier (Dakelh), Sekani (Tse’khene), Dane-zaa, Cree, Sauteau, and Dene Peoples.

PEOPLE AND PARTNERSHIP ACKNOWLEDGMENT

NH recognizes the 11 Métis Chartered Communities, as well as the Inuit and Urban and Away from Home Indigenous peoples on these lands. We are thankful for the continued opportunity to work in partnership to optimize the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples whom we serve.



COMMITMENT STATEMENT TO TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

NH acknowledges the harms experienced by Indigenous peoples accessing the health system. We are committed to new ways of being, through building healthy and trusting relationships with Indigenous communities, families, individuals, and employees. These commitments are interwoven throughout the strategic priorities and are integral to the success of NH.

For more information



Read more about NH's commitments to Truth and Reconciliation in our Strategic plan



Read the College of Health and Care Professionals of BC Indigenous cultural safety, humility, and anti-racism standard of practice (applies to physical therapists)

COMMITMENT STATEMENT TO TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE

NH acknowledges that individuals who are seeking information regarding pelvic floor health and pelvic floor physical therapy may have experienced trauma in their lives. We are committed to providing a safe environment built on trust and collaboration while always respecting the personal autonomy and privacy of all individuals.

Introduction

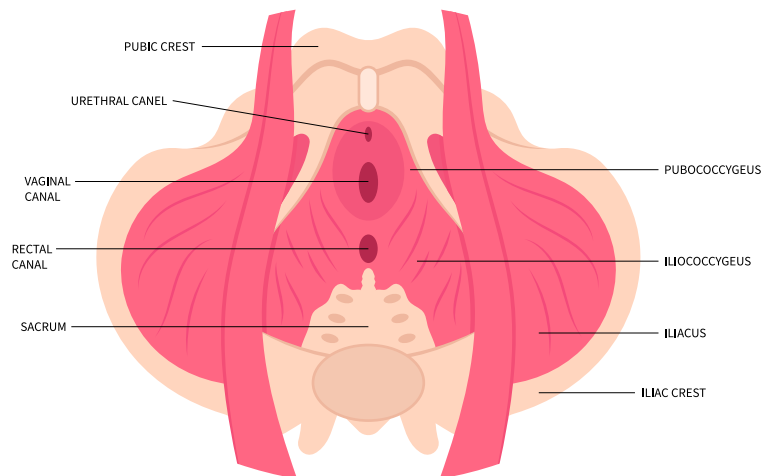
This guide can support parents to heal and strengthen their pelvic floor after birth. Health care providers may find it useful when working with prenatal and postpartum families. It includes information about vaginal and cesarean (also called c-section) births.

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

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

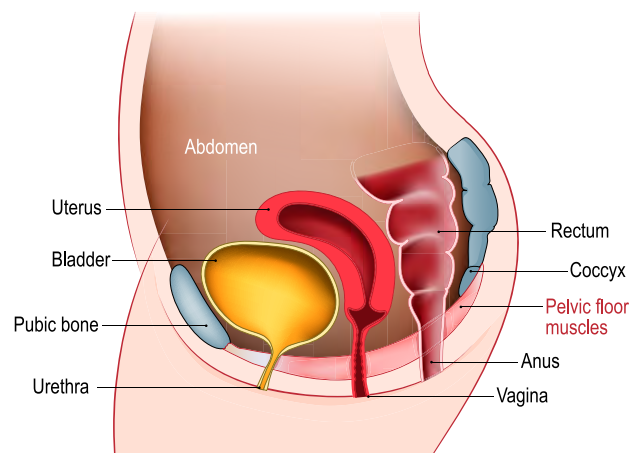
1. To support the pelvic organs (including the bladder, uterus, and bowel)
2. To maintain and control continence (when there is loss of bladder or bowel control)
3. To provide stability to the spine and pelvic area
4. To allow normal sexual function and satisfaction during intercourse

Pregnancy and birth can strain and stretch the muscles of the pelvic floor. Just like any other muscle injury, healing can take about 6 to 8 weeks. Some parents may need more time, support, and professional help to recover fully.



FEMALE PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES



Postpartum healing takes time

Recovery from birth looks different for everyone. No matter how labour and birth unfold, a parent's body will need time to heal. Healing is a journey, not a race.

VAGINAL BIRTH

- During pregnancy and vaginal birth, pelvic muscles can get stretched and injured.
- While healing time can vary, most postpartum parents recover fully within 6 to 12 weeks after birth.
- Healing time may take longer for some parents if they need stitches after birth, either from a tear in the perineum (the space between vagina and anus) or the use of forceps, vacuum, or other instruments to help guide baby out of the vagina.

C-SECTION BIRTH

- A c-section birth is a major surgery when a baby is born through a cut (called an incision) in the abdomen (belly) and uterus.
- While healing time can vary, most postpartum parents recover from the surgery between 6 to 12 weeks after birth.
- There may be pain along the incision as well as vaginal bleeding in the early weeks after birth.



REMEMBER: It's ok to have a different healing time than someone else. Speak with a health care provider to ask questions about recovery after birth.

It can take up to 6 to 12 weeks to heal after birth. Give your body the time it needs. See your health care provider or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 right away if you have concerning symptoms. See the box below for details.

YOUR BODY AFTER PREGNANCY

Symptoms to watch for in the first 6 weeks after birth

- Breast or nipple pain
- Fever (oral temperature is greater than 37.5°C)
- Hemorrhoids or perineal pain causing major discomfort
- Hip, back, or pelvic bone pain
- Leg pain or swelling
- Postpartum blues that lasts longer than 2 weeks
- Problems voiding (urine and stool)
- Red, sore c-section incision with foul smelling incision draining
- Swelling, redness, or discharge around a c-section the incision
- Vaginal discharge: Foul smell, large clots, or heavy bright red flow

Gentle exercises to try right after birth

In the first few hours and days after birth, deep breathing and circulation exercises are important. They can help minimize complications and help keep you moving, even if you are recovering in bed.

DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES

Repeat 10 times:

- Take in a slow, deep breath.
- Hold for 3 seconds then breathe out.
- Aim to fully expand your lungs with each breath.
- Shoulders should remain relaxed.

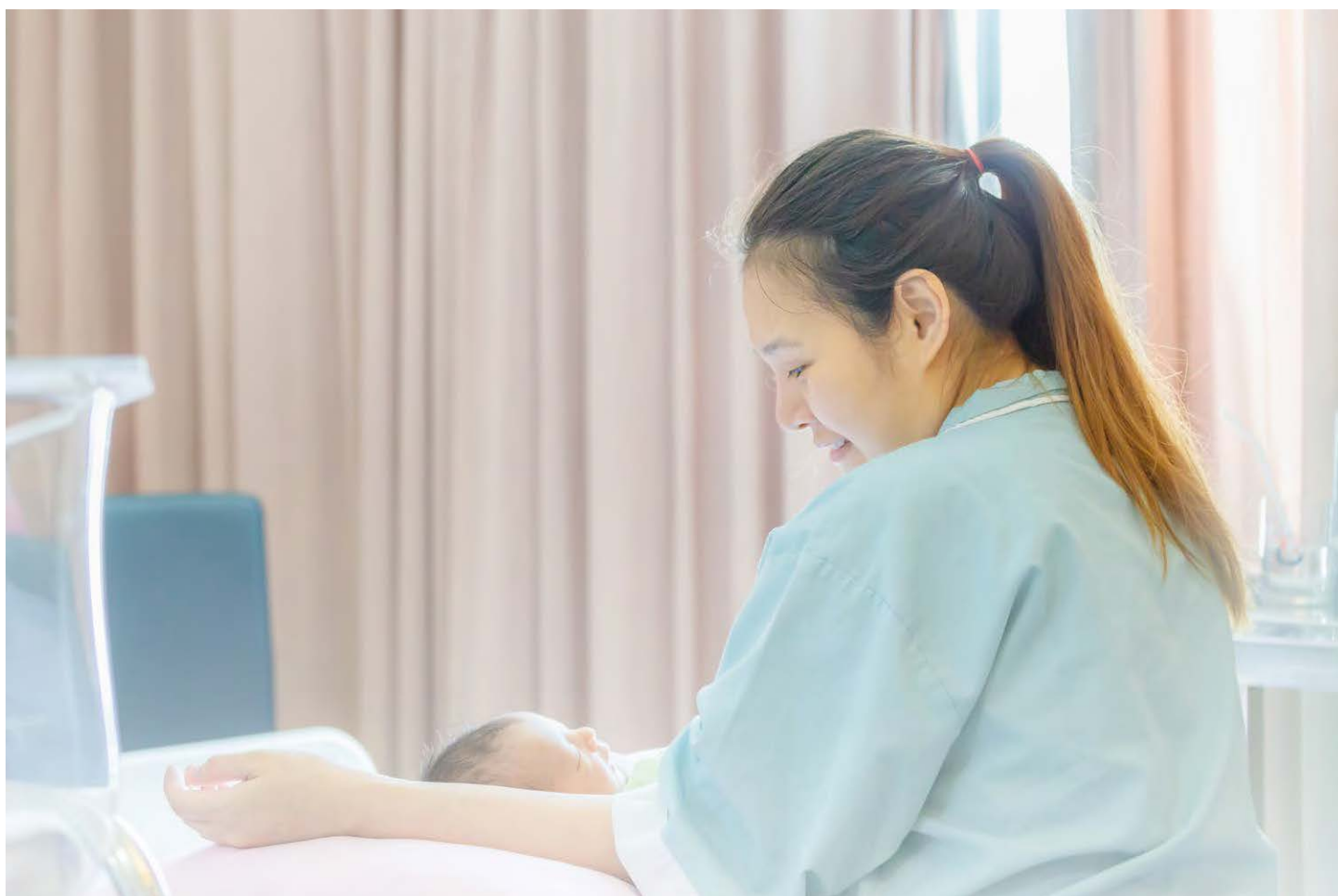
CIRCULATION EXERCISES

Repeat 10 times each:

- Make small circles with your ankles.
- Slide your heel up towards your bottom along the bed and out straight again.
- Tighten your thigh and bottom muscles, hold for 3 seconds, relax.



REMEMBER: Movement is safe and healthy after pregnancy for most postpartum parents



Tips to help postpartum recovery

Follow these tips to promote comfort in the first 6 weeks postpartum or longer if needed.

REMEMBER	HELPFUL TIPS
Get rest: Rest body when feeling tired	Some ways to promote comfort can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lie down on your side or back when able. This might help manage pressure, swelling, and pain in your abdomen, 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 rests, 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. • Try feeding baby in a side lying position to give your perineum and pelvic floor a break.
Pain control with ice: Ice can help reduce pain and swelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply ice to the abdomen and/or perineum for 10 to 15 minutes, 2 to 3 times a day in the first 72 hours after birth. • Always wrap ice in a layer of towel or cloth. Do not apply ice directly to the skin.
Gentle movement: Basic pelvic floor exercises can be started right away	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As able, avoid heavy lifting, pushing, pulling, or strenuous activities. This includes lifting the car seat and most household chores. Consider asking others for assistance during this time. • Walking is a safe and easy way to slowly begin moving more, no matter the birth. Start with walking around in your home. Increase the distance as you feel able. • Basic pelvic floor exercises are safe to start right away as long as pain is under control. Refer to the Exercise Guide section of this resource for more information.
Manage constipation: Here are a few things to try	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not strain (push hard) to pass stool. Eat food high in fibre, such as whole grain breads and cereals, vegetables, fruit, and beans and drink plenty of fluids, like water. • Reduce pressure during bowel movements. • Focus on relaxing the pelvic muscles during voiding by using deep breathing or blowing through a closed fist. • You will probably pass stool within 2 or 3 days after the birth. If you can't go, try a stool softener (available without a prescription), but use it for a short time only. Talk to your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist if you have ongoing trouble.

Returning to activity



GENERAL TIPS

- Start slow and build up your tolerance to exercise. Don't try and do too much too soon. Move your body gently and resume activities of daily living (such as light housework, running errands, and enjoyable activities) gradually after baby is born.
- Drink plenty of water to help avoid constipation.
- If required, take pain medicine at least 30 minutes before engaging in any physical activity. Many medications are safe while breastfeeding; talk to your healthcare provider to be sure.
- Many parents who've had a c-section prefer firm, high-waisted compression underwear or control briefs to offer abdominal support. Wearing these can reduce pain and provide comfort in the first 6 weeks postpartum and beyond.

EXERCISES TO AVOID IN THE FIRST 6 TO 12 WEEKS



- Crunches or sit-ups
- Front planks
- High intensity interval training (HIIT)
- Lifting anything heavier than your baby, unless given direction from your health care provider (for c-section births)
- Lifting over your head (for c-section births)
- Running



SIGNS YOU MAY BE “OVER-DOING IT”

- Pelvic symptoms including:
 - increased or new bleeding or spotting
 - pelvic pain
 - sensations of pressure, bulging, or heaviness
 - urinating when you don't intend to
- Symptoms lasting more than 30 to 45 minutes after exercise
- If any of these symptoms occur, eliminate the aggravating exercise from your routine, take a day of rest.
- If any of these symptoms **continue** to occur, stop doing that activity for a while, take a day or two rest before gradually and gently resuming activity, and speak to a healthcare provider.

Exercise guide

Use this exercise guide to support:





1. Recovering from birth
2. Increasing activity
3. Returning to regular activity




REMEMBER: Exercise, along with healthy eating, rest, time for self, and support, are important parts of a parent's healing, self-care, and well-being after birth.




Always consult a physical therapist or physician before starting a new exercise routine

1. Suggested exercises for recovery

EXERCISE	WHAT TO DO	HOW MANY TIMES (suggested)	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	Lay on your back with your knees bent. To engage your pelvic floor, imagine you are slowing a stream of urine or trying not to pass gas. Do not hold your breath. Try to keep your stomach and thighs relaxed.	5–10 times, 3–4 times a day. After a few weeks, you can try to progress to holding for 4–5 seconds.	
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.	
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.	
---------------------	--	--	---

2. Suggested exercises for increasing activity

EXERCISE	WHAT TO DO	HOW MANY TIMES (suggested)	PICTURE
Pelvic floor activation – sitting	Engage your pelvic floor by imagining you are slowing a stream of urine or trying not to pass gas. 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 and engage your pelvic floor. 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.	5–10 per side, up to 3 times a day.	
Knee fall-out	Lay on your back with your knees bent and engage your pelvic floor. 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.	5–10 per side, up to 3 times a day.	
Marching	Lay on your back with your knees bent and engage your pelvic floor. 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.	5–10 per side, up to 3 times a day.	

3. Suggested exercises for returning to regular activity

EXERCISE	DETAILS
Walking	<p>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, increase the intensity to moderate, building up to 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic exercise (you're able to speak but not sing).</p>
Aerobic exercise	<p>When you can do 30 minutes of walking without any symptoms you can introduce more moderate aerobic activities. Aerobic exercise is a repetitive structured activity that increases your heart rate and breathing rate. Some examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dancing • Jogging • Swimming • Cycling • Walking • And more! <p>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 and during pregnancy. Do not start to progress to moderate activity if you experience the following during walking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain • Feeling of heaviness in your pelvis • Leaking of urine <p>If you'd like to start jogging, go slowly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 jogging periods
Resistance exercise	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 to 6 weeks after birth: Start body weight strength exercises (e.g., gentle squats, lunges) • 6 to 8 weeks after birth: Start loaded strength exercises (e.g., adding weights) • 9 to 12 weeks after birth: Start to progress to higher intensity and impact activities bases on your goal (e.g., jumping) <p>Remember: If you have had a c-section, make sure to check-in with your physical therapist or health care provider before starting resistance exercise.</p>

Working with a physical therapist

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Physical therapy is an essential part of a parent's recovery after birth. It can improve healing for new parents during the postpartum period. Some benefits for families who work with physical therapy include:

- Reduce pain levels over a shorter period
- Return to regular activity more quickly

WHEN TO SEE A PHYSICAL THERAPIST?

If parents:

- Want professional support for exercise or returning to movement
- Have incontinence (leaking urine or stool) that continues beyond 6 weeks after birth
- Have a feeling of heaviness, pressure or bulging in the vagina or rectum
- Have pain in the pelvis or lower back, pain with intercourse, or heavy pressure is present beyond 6 weeks after birth
- Are having difficulty with daily activities due to pain, pressure, or any other symptoms that are concerning.



Did you know?

Pelvic floor physical therapy can help:

- With postpartum symptoms such as pelvic pain and urinary incontinence
- Throughout the course of your postpartum recovery journey




How to contact a physical therapist

There are two streams of service available: Publicly funded and private pay. A health care provider (e.g., doctor, nurse, physical therapist etc.) referral is required for publicly funded services. No referral is required for private pay services.

Publicly funded physical therapists trained in pelvic floor health

LOCATION	CLINIC NAME	PHONE NUMBER
Daajing Giids, Haida Gwaii	Haida Gwaii Hospital and Health Centre – Xaayda Gwaay NgaaysdII Naay	250.559.4919
Kitimat	Kitimat General Hospital	250.632.8331
Prince George	University Hospital of Northern BC	250.565.2265
Prince Rupert	Prince Rupert General Hospital	250.622.6174

Private pay physical therapists trained in pelvic floor health

LOCATION	CLINIC NAME	PHONE NUMBER
Dawson Creek	Deep Physiotherapy	250.782.3676
Fort St. John	Fort St. John Physiotherapy	250.785.1175
Prince George	Phoenix Physiotherapy Clinic	250.562.8248
	PG Pelvic Floor and Core	250.612.0526
	Simply Less Pain	778.743.1249
Prince Rupert	Mountain Coast Physiotherapy	778.834.5263
Smithers	Trillium Integrative Health Centre	778.640.1119
Telkwa	Ridgeline Physiotherapy	250.570.7250
Terrace	Cedar River Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Centre	250.638.1010
Virtual physical therapy	Various	Women's health physical therapists in BC 

Additional resources



[Physical activity, pregnancy, and postpartum](#) – NH public webpage



[Self-care for new moms: Physical activity can help](#) – NH Stories



[Physical activity: Tips for postpartum moms \(PDF\)](#)

Important contact information

If you need to speak with a health care provider:

- Call your primary care provider (e.g., family doctor, midwife, or nurse practitioner)
- Connect with your local health unit
- Visit the NH website for more information

Here are some more options for you and your family:



[Connect with the First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day](#)



[Call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1](#)



[Contact the NH Virtual Clinic](#) at 1-844-645-7811

References

1. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (2024). Exercise after pregnancy: Frequently asked questions. Retrieved from acog.org/womens-health/faqs/exercise-after-pregnancy
2. The Cheerful Academy (2024). Pelvic health fundamentals: Clinical application for a strong foundation in pelvic health. Retrieved from thecheerfulacademy.com/courses/pelvic-health-fundamentals
3. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2024). Move your way. Find your way to move: For, during, and after pregnancy. Retrieved from <https://health.gov/moveyourway#during-after-pregnancy>



#HealthyNorth

northernhealth.ca