

Snohomish Midwives  
57 Cedar Avenue  
Snohomish, WA 98290  
877-869-6105  
Fax: 360-563-2662

## **Postpartum Pelvic Floor Health & Abdominal Strengthening Exercises**

**KEGELS:** contraction of the pelvic floor

The pelvic floor consists of a “hammock” of muscles that covers the bottom of the pelvic cavity and assists in supporting the abdominal and pelvic organs. It includes several pairs of muscles that join in the mid-line. The pelvic floor encircles and supports the abdominal contents, bowel, bladder, and uterus.

### How to recognize the muscles

1. Sit on the toilet. Empty a small amount of urine, then try to stop the flow for 1-2 seconds. Relax completely allowing the bladder to empty. The pelvic floor muscles are responsible for this control. Most people take a few trials to be successful. This activity is called a “Stop Test” and should only be used to help you feel where the pelvic floor muscles are. This should never be used as a daily exercise, as this can disrupt the bladder emptying mechanism.
2. While sitting on a chair or lying down, insert one or two fingers into the vagina and squeeze or place a fingertip on or into the rectal outlet and contract the muscles as though you are holding back a bowel movement. You should be able to feel the pelvic floor move with these muscle contractions.

### Benefits of Kegels

1. Helps improve or maintain control of the bowel and bladder.
2. Heightened sexual response.
3. Maintenance of strength, tone, and elasticity, which helps support the abdominal and pelvic contents against gravity (i.e. prolapse).

### Common mistakes when exercising the pelvic floor

1. Holding your breath and attempting to bear down.
2. Contracting the abdominals, buttocks, and inner thigh muscles. Putting a hand on your stomach and buttocks will help you tell if you are using these muscles when attempting to do a Kegel.

### Starting the exercise

1. Remember to relax your body before and after the exercise.
2. Tighten only with the muscles of the pelvic floor.
3. Breathe during the exercises.

When you start, you will probably notice that the muscles do not want to stay contracted or tightening very long. If you feel it letting go, just tighten again, several times if necessary. In a week or two, you will probably notice that the control improves.

In the beginning, concentrate on improving awareness, strength, and the ability to relax the pelvic floor. Be sure to let the pelvic floor relax completely after each contraction.

#### Some pelvic floor exercises

1. Contract and release of the pelvic floor: While on your back or side, contract or draw the pelvic floor up, as if preventing the flow of urine. Hold for 3-5 seconds and relax completely. Relax for 10 seconds and repeat.
2. Quick flicks of the pelvic floor: While on your back or side, tighten the pelvic floor for 1-2 seconds, remembering to pull up and in. Relax completely as indicated in exercise 1.
3. Long holds of the pelvic floor: While on your back or side, tighten the pelvic floor as in exercise 1, but hold it for 8-10 seconds. Relax completely as indicated in exercise 1. Hold Kegels are the most important for improving and maintaining strength.
4. Kegel exercise during sexual activity: Do this in any position where there is a coital connection and legs are apart and relaxed. Grip as firmly as you can and hold for 3 seconds before relaxing. Avoid tensing buttocks, thighs or abdominals. Ask for feedback from your partner if you feel comfortable with this.

Pelvic floor exercises can be started immediately following birth at a rate of 10 contractions.

### **ABDOMINAL STRENGTHENING**

Traditional abdominal strengthening has focused on the Rectus Abdominis muscle in the center of the stomach. Contraction of the Rectus increases intra-abdominal pressure and bears down and stresses the pelvic floor. In the treatment of pelvic pain we want to lift up on the pelvic floor and support it. Therefore, the focus of strengthening will be on the abdominal muscle called the Transverse Abdominis. This muscle assists in lifting the pelvic floor and supporting the abdominal cavity, vagina, urethra, and bowel. The Transversus is located in the abdominal cavity just above the pubic bone.

#### Some abdominal strengthening exercises

1. Hands and Knees Tummy Tuck: While on hands and knees, arch your back and sway your back several times to feel the movement that you have in this area. Now find the mid-position between full arch and full sway. This is the position that you want to maintain. While doing this exercise it is very important that you do not arch or sway beyond this position. Place one of your hands on the lowest part of your stomach, just above the pubic bone. Pull or “suck” your stomach in without arching or swaying your back. This motion is very much like what you do when you are zipping up a pair of tight

pants. Do not hold your breath. Once this muscle is contracted and held in, hold it for 3 seconds and then relax.

2. Transversus Muscle Balancing-Sahrmann's Series:
  - a. Level 1: While on your back with your knees bent, tighten your lower stomach just above the pubic bone without flattening your back. This motion is very much like what you do when you zip up a pair of tight pants. Hold this position steady while sliding one leg along the floor or bed. Do not let the abdomen bulge or the back flatten, but keep it pulled in. Do not hold your breath. Repeat with the other leg. Relax.
  - b. Level 2: Tighten your lower stomach as in Level 1. Now lift one leg toward your chest and then straighten it out in the air about 2 feet above the bed or floor. Remember to not let the abdomen bulge or let the back flatten. Do not hold your breath. Repeat with the other leg. Relax.
  - c. Level 3: Tighten your lower stomach as in Level 1. Now lift both knees to your chest and straighten one leg out into the air about 1 foot above the bed or floor. Remember to not let the abdomen bulge or let the back flatten. Do not hold your breath. Repeat with the other leg. Relax.
  - d. Level 4: Tighten your lower stomach as in Level 1. Now lift both legs toward your chest and then straighten one out in the air about 2 inches above the bed or floor. Now lower this leg to the bed or floor. Remember to not let the abdomen bulge or let the back flatten. Do not hold your breath. Repeat with the other leg. Relax.

## **DIASTASIS RECTI CORRECTION EXERCISE**

This exercise is designed to help correct the Diastasis Recti deformity that is an “unzipping” of the Rectus Abdominis muscle that occurs in many women during pregnancy. A curl-up is contraindicated when Diastasis is present. The abdominals must be used in their role as the muscles of forced exhalation during a head raise only. If the shoulders are raised, this is the start of a curl-up; the obliques will start to work and they will pull on the Rectus sheath and the Diastasis will be increased.

Get in the position where knees are bent for a posterior pelvic tilt. The hands are placed on either side of the muscle to support the Diastasis. This can be done by crossing the arms or just straight pressure from each side. Take 2-3 deep breaths. On an outward breath, do a head raise only.

To prevent aggravation of the condition, avoid rising from lying down with a sit-up (instead you should roll to the side and use your arms) and the Valsalva maneuver of holding your breath and straining during bowel movements or lifting.

It is essential to begin the Diastasis Recti correction exercise immediately postpartum.