

## Recovery after a Vaginal Birth

Congratulations on your birth! It is important that you look after yourself after your delivery to ensure that you recover your pelvic floor, abdominal and core muscle properly. During your 9 months of pregnancy, your body has undergone a huge amount of physiological changes including an increase in blood volume and hormones which makes your muscles and ligaments more stretchy, increased weight and pressure on your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles and pelvic organs.



When you have a vaginal birth your pelvic floor muscle stretch a whopping 3.8 times their resting length. Imagine stretching your calf muscle out that far, there is bound to be some muscle and ligament damage that need time to recover.

The pelvic floor has an amazing ability to stretch, heal and recover but it is important to follow advice and guidance on how to optimize your rehabilitation.

### How to optimize your recovery

Immediately after birth:

Follow the RICER principals that you would if you had an ankle or knee injury, the pelvic floor is no different

#### 1. Rest

- Aim for 20 minutes every 2hrs
- Rest is best laying down as it helps to take the weight off your pelvic floor muscles and organs
- You can try this at home by breastfeeding side lying, playing with toddlers on the floor, newborn snuggles laying down

#### 2. Ice

- Frozen maternity pads
- Icy poles
- Frozen condoms
- All make great ice packs
- Cover them with paper towel to avoid the ice pack touching your skin potentially causing an ice burn

- Aim for 10 minutes every 2 hours
- Continue until the swelling in your perineum reduces, this varies amongst women. It could be for 2-3 days, for some it can be up to 7-10 days depending on the swelling after birth

### 3. Compress

- Double pads, double undies
- Bike shorts all make for good supports early after delivery
- You can use recovery shorts such as Lenny Rose or SRC after birth, I generally recommend to use these after the first 4-5 days as they can be difficult to get on/off early on

### 4. Elevate

- Just like elevating a swollen ankle or knee, it is best to try and elevate your lower half of the body above your heart to help reduce swelling in your perineum and pelvic floor
- You can achieve this by putting some pillows under your knees either laying on your back or side
- Aim for 20 minutes every 2-3 hours

### 5. Rehabilitate

- After birth it's time to recommence your pelvic floor exercises!
- Starting your pelvic floor exercises soon after birth helps to pump the swelling from your perineum and vulval area to help it heal faster.
- You can start your pelvic floor exercises as soon as you feel comfortable and can perform a squeeze without any pain or discomfort.

## **How do I start my pelvic floor exercises?**

Aim for x 10 gentle pelvic floor muscle contractions, which are around 50 percent of your maximal squeeze effort every 2-3 hours during the day.

It is normal to feel different when you start your pelvic floor exercises after birth, this is where it comes in useful to have started these exercises prior to birth to help you know what it felt like to squeeze your muscles before birth.

Once you feel comfortable and you can start to build on your strength and endurance. See my tips on pelvic floor exercises.

## **What to avoid in the first 6 weeks**

- Try to not lift anything heavier than your newborn baby
- Avoid getting constipated and straining
- Try drinking at least 2L of fluid per day
- pear or prune juice to keep your bowels soft and easy to pass
- no high impact exercise such as running jumping, skipping

## **Your 6 week check!**

It is so important for your long term health of your pelvic floor, abdominal muscles and back to have a 6 week check of your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles. I always tell my clients you only get one pelvic floor, so it's better to be proactive than reactive.

Even if you have had a relatively straight forward birth and you have minimal symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction, I highly recommend booking to see a Pelvic Physio to have the muscles assessed and help design you a suitable exercise and rehab recovery program and assess your risks for future pelvic floor issues.

## **Signs and symptoms to watch out for during recovery**

- Urine leakage with cough/sneeze or an urge
- Inability to delay the urge to poo or wee
- Incontinence of the bowels including poo and/or wind
- Vaginal heaviness, aching or a bulging sensation
- Not able to feel or sense your pelvic floor muscles contracting or letting go
- Pain with weeing or pooing

These symptoms can be a sign of pelvic floor dysfunction. If you have any of these symptoms early on, please seek help early. I recommend booking in with your Pregnancy and Pelvic Health Physio as soon as you have any concerns as they can be addressed with a suitable treatment plan to help you recover as quickly as possible.