Physiotherapy after Childbirth
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Introduction

In the six months after childbirth your body needs extra care. Pregnancy hormones have softened your ligaments and stomach and pelvic floor muscles have stretched; it’s easy to injure yourself during this time if your joints are not well supported.

This booklet shows you how to help your body recover after pregnancy and childbirth. Sometimes new mums need specialist physiotherapy care for persistent problems following childbirth. For a list of common conditions and women’s physiotherapy contacts please see page 19 of this booklet.

Postnatal Exercise Class for mother and baby

Women who have had their baby at KEMH are welcome to attend a free weekly exercise class with their baby aged between six weeks and six months (corrected age for premature babies).

The class includes exercises designed to help your body recover after pregnancy and childbirth as well as baby massage.

**When:** Tuesdays (Beginners)
Wednesdays (Advanced)

**Where:** KEMH Physiotherapy Department (B Block, Lower Ground)

**What to wear:** Comfortable exercise clothes and shoes

**What to bring:** Towel and baby massage oil

To book please call 6458 2790 (after your six week postnatal check-up). Class times are given on booking.

For your safety please make sure you arrive on time as you may not be able to join in if you are late.

**Good posture - your daily training for no extra time!**

When standing and sitting make sure you:

- stand or sit tall
- lengthen your spine
- gently draw in your pelvic floor muscles
- draw in your lower stomach muscles.
Good bladder habits

First two to three days after having your baby

• Aim to drink 2-3 litres of fluid per day and pass urine every 2-3 hours. This helps prevent overstretching of your bladder as it fills more rapidly due to fluid loss from pregnancy.
• If you notice any of the following, please tell your midwife or physiotherapist:
  - Reduced sensation of bladder filling
  - Difficulty starting the flow of urine
  - Slow or stop/start flow
  - Feeling as if not emptying properly
  - Leakage of urine

Long term

• Drink 1½ - 2 litres of fluid each day (up to 3 litres if breastfeeding). Limit caffeine, alcohol, soft drinks and artificial sweeteners.
• Go to the toilet when your bladder feels full, not 'just in case'. The average is 4-6 times per day, 0-1 times per night, 250-500mls each time.
• Sit down on the toilet seat and take your time.
• Do your pelvic floor exercises each day (see page 7).

Good bowel habits

• Go when you get a good urge, anywhere from three times per day to three times per week is within normal limits.
• Eat plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and unprocessed food. Prune, pear and apple juices are natural laxatives.
• Avoid constipation and straining, this weakens your pelvic floor and may cause haemorrhoids, anal fissures and prolapse.
• If you have pain, swelling or stitches, support the area between the vagina and anus with a wad of toilet paper while you empty your bowels.
• Exercise daily for 30 minutes to keep your bowel regular. Walking is particularly good in the first six weeks.
• Sit correctly on the toilet (see diagram).

Sitting correctly on the toilet

• Keep back straight, lean forward, rest forearms on knees.
• Use a footstool if your heels don’t touch the floor.
• Have your legs apart.
• Bulge (push stomach forward) and brace (make waist wide) to empty bowel.
• Make a ‘hisss’ sound to activate the correct muscles and prevent breath holding and straining.
• Pull up pelvic floor muscles after you finish.
After a Caesarean birth

It may take 6 – 12 weeks for your body to heal – avoid heavy or strenuous activity in the first six weeks then slowly build up as comfortable. If you feel tired or your body aches, you need to rest.

Do the exercises in this pamphlet as soon as you feel comfortable, usually around day three. Stop if you feel pain.

A daily walk is a good way to loosen up and improve fitness (from week one). Start with short distances (10 minutes) on flat ground, then progress distance and difficulty as comfortable.

Light housework such as cooking and dusting is okay, but avoid vacuuming and lifting anything heavier than your baby in the first six weeks. As a general guide, any lifting which results in breath holding indicates the load is too heavy.

Driving may be safe when you are able to brake suddenly, move feet between pedals and look over your shoulder without pain. However, some car insurance companies do not cover you in the first six weeks after abdominal surgery, so ring and check before driving.

For further information please refer to the booklet: Following Caesarean Birth.

Getting into / out of bed

Rolling on your side reduces strain on your stomach muscles after a caesarean or vaginal delivery.

Essential exercises

Pelvic floor exercises

Six good reasons to do pelvic floor exercises:

- prevent leakage of urine
- maintain bowel control
- better sexual function
- prevent or reduce prolapse
- back support
- strengthen core muscles (and flatten stomach).

Immediately after having your baby - Stage 1

- Start pelvic floor exercises (gently) within 24 hours – even if you have stitches or swelling. The gentle muscle pump action improves circulation and reduces swelling which helps healing.
- Breathe normally and keep buttocks and thighs relaxed.
- Squeeze, lift and hold the muscles around your back passage, vagina and front passage (as if trying to stop wind and urine from coming out) then fully relax the muscles and start again.
- ‘Little and often’, do four to five gentle contractions at a time throughout the day.
- Doing these exercises lying down may be easiest to start with but progress to sitting and standing as soon as you can.
- As soon as possible, progress to stage 2.
Strengthen the pelvic floor - Stage 2

Stage 2

- Do pelvic floor exercises as described in stage 1.
- Remember to breathe normally, keep buttocks and thighs relaxed.
- When you can do 10 repetitions of Level 1 (see chart) progress to Level 2, and so on.
- 10 repetitions = 1 set
- Do two or three sets of exercises each day.

Success doesn’t happen overnight. Work on this program daily to ensure that your pelvic floor muscles are supporting you in everyday living.

Besides these exercises, it is important to lose excess weight, avoid constipation or straining and be physically active every day.

If you are unsure how to do pelvic floor exercises please make an appointment to see a Women’s Health Physiotherapist.

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Abdominal exercises

The following exercises are important following the birth of your baby. Aim for 10-15 repetitions, twice a day.

Core muscles (deep abdominals and pelvic floor)

Sit upright, relax your lower stomach into your hand. Breathing normally, draw in your pelvic floor muscles and gently pull your stomach away from your hand. Hold for five seconds then relax.

Too hard? Try lying on your side.
Too easy? Try standing up.
See how many you can do.
Increase the hold time, strength and number of contractions as you get fitter.

Pelvic rocking/tilting

Draw in pelvic floor and lower stomach muscles. Tilt the hip bones backwards so your back flattens into the bed and your tailbone lifts slightly. Keep your bottom on the bed or floor. Hold for five seconds, breathing normally.

Handy hint

‘Squeeze and lift’ your pelvic floor muscles when you:
• cough, sneeze, laugh • lift • carry your baby • stand and sit

Handy hint

It’s a good idea to lie down for an hour each day to relieve pressure on your pelvic floor muscles in the first six weeks after having your baby.
Knee rolling

**Purpose:** To stretch back and strengthen stomach muscles.

Lie and roll both knees gently to each side, keeping shoulders flat. Relax your body, breathe deeply.

Seated Twist

**Purpose:** To open chest and stretch spine.

Sit at front of chair with hands on thighs, lengthen spine, open chest. Without causing pain, twist to place left hand on outside of right knee, right hand behind back (see photo). Align head with chest. Repeat to opposite side.

Butterfly

**Purpose:** To open chest and strengthen upper back.

Sit tall at front of chair, hands together in front of face, feet flat on floor. Open arms (see photo) and draw shoulder blades together. Keep shoulders relaxed.

General exercises

**Exercise is important as it:**

- helps with physical recovery of muscles affected by pregnancy and childbirth
- assists with weight control
- improves health and fitness
- facilitates mental wellbeing
- sets a good example for your children.

It takes up to six months for the ligaments in your body to return to normal. Return to exercise should be gradual.

**Exercise guidelines**

- In the first six weeks, strengthen the pelvic floor, back and stomach muscles with the exercises in this pamphlet. Walk for general exercise - start with 10-15 minutes on level ground and gradually increase.
- By six weeks, aim for at least 30 minutes walking, swimming or low impact exercise per day. Continue pelvic floor and abdominal exercises.
- Avoid jumping and jarring activities (e.g. jogging, high impact aerobics) for the first three to six months (you may check with a Women's Health Physiotherapist to see when it is suitable for you to resume high impact activity).
- Involve your baby in your exercise program.
Back care

Your ligaments and muscles may be weak in the six months after the birth of your baby and because you will be lifting, bending and sitting more than usual, you are at greater risk of back injury.

Help protect your back:

• make sure work surfaces are at waist height (e.g. baby change table)
• kneel or squat for low level jobs such as gardening or making a bed
• tighten your core muscles (pelvic floor and abdominals) as you lift
• breathe normally as you lift

Pick up baby or toddler using good lifting technique.

Try a sling.

Handy hint

Never carry a full baby bath. Use jug or bucket to fill and empty.
To avoid twisting your back, place one knee on the bed.

Half kneeling at the corner of the bed reduces back strain.

The correct height for a change table is at waist height.

Kneel on the seat or put your foot on the ledge when putting baby in the car.

Breathing and relaxation

Motherhood can at times be stressful. Breathing and relaxation can help manage this.

**Benefits:**
- helps calm you and your baby
- assists with milk release
- improves energy levels
- reduces stress for yourself and others around you
- helps you cope with everyday demands.

**Handy hint**
Use a laundry trolley when possible, or carry washing in smaller loads.

**When stressed you may notice:**
- muscle tension (jaws and shoulders)
- anxiety or irritability
- headache
- upper chest breathing
- difficulty coping.

**How to reduce stress:**
- release muscle tension - relax jaw so teeth are apart, drop shoulders down and back
- breathe in slowly and sigh out
- focus on one activity at a time.

If you feel unable to cope, ask for help from family and friends or speak to your doctor or child health nurse.
Handling your baby

Lie your baby on its back (face up) to sleep. When your baby is awake, you may also lie your baby on its side and tummy. Regular tummy time is important from day one. Try a little bit often as part of your baby’s daily routine. There are many ways to build tummy time into the day.

• Carrying your baby face down over your forearm
• Lying with baby propped up on its forearms on your chest
• Sitting with baby face down over your lap

For more ideas see the ‘Baby Moves’ leaflet in the back of your purple ‘All about me’ book.

Baby massage

Time used for massage can be relaxing and enjoyable for both you and your baby e.g. after a bath or when baby is lying on your lap.

• Use massage at a quiet, settled time.
• Undress baby as much as possible.
• Use pure edible oil (e.g. apricot, light olive).
• Put oil onto your hands – not directly onto baby.
• Use firm, smooth continuous strokes with as much hand contact as possible e.g. using palm of hand or flats of fingers.
• If stroking on chest, use diagonals (e.g. shoulder to opposite hip).
• If stroking on the back, use long strokes down the back.
• Stroking can also be used on the face, head and limbs.

Handy hint

Allow your baby to explore and learn through movement – avoid baby walkers and ‘Jolly Jumpers’ for safety and developmental reasons.
Reasons to see a Women’s Health Physiotherapist

If you experience any of the below issues within the first six months after the birth of your baby, please contact the KEMH Physiotherapy Department on (08) 6458 2790 - you do not require a doctor’s referral if you had your baby at KEMH.

• back, neck, tailbone or wrist pain
• painful scar tissue (caesarean, episiotomy, tear)
• pain during sexual intercourse
• weak or separated stomach muscles
• blocked milk ducts or mastitis
• cracked nipples
• bladder or bowel problems:
  - leakage of urine, wind, stool
  - urgency to pass urine or to use bowels
  - passing urine frequently
  - pain
• pelvic floor weakness or vaginal ‘heaviness’.

If it has been more than six months since your baby’s birth or you would prefer to attend a physiotherapy clinic closer to home please see the list of women’s health physiotherapy services on the right. You may need a GP referral.

Useful contacts

Public Women’s Health Physiotherapy

Armadale Kelmscott Health Service (referral required)
(08) 9391 2281

Bentley Health Service (referral required)
(08) 9334 3791

Fiona Stanley Hospital (referral required)
(08) 6152 2222

Fremantle Hospital (referral required)
(08) 9431 2533

Joondalup Health Campus (general physiotherapy - referral required)
(08) 9400 9430

King Edward Memorial Hospital (no referral required if you delivered at KEMH less than six months ago)
(08) 6458 2790

Mandurah Community Health Centre (referral required)
(08) 9586 4400

Midland Hospital (referral required)
(08) 9462 4030

Osborne Park Hospital (referral required)
(08) 9346 8439

Rockingham Kwinana District Hospital (referral required)
(08) 9592 0600

Royal Perth Hospital (referral required)
(08) 9224 2076

Private Women’s Health Physiotherapy

Ring the Australian Physiotherapy Association on (08) 9389 9211 or go to www.physiotherapy.asn.au and click on ‘Continence and Women’s Health WA’ for the number of a physiotherapist in your area. No referral required.