

PROTECTING YOUR PERINEUM

The concept of protecting the perineum during labour is paramount in the prevention of incontinence (urine leakage)

This includes:

1. exercises to facilitate proper muscular strength
2. good habits to develop and maintain on a daily basis. During physical effort, most of us have a tendency to contract our abdominal muscles and block our breathing. This actually lowers our diaphragm, which in turn pushes into the organs of our pelvic region (uterus, bladder, intestines). The more intense is the physical effort, the more intense is the push on our organs. In the long run, the accumulation of 'microtraumas' creates a literal descent of the bladder and uterus in women, and inguinal hernias in men.

Breathing exercises

1. Sit at the edge of a chair, elbows resting on your knees and back straight
2. Tighten your perineum (as if to prevent urination)
3. While keeping your perineum tightened, exhale by squeezing your belly from the bottom up (as in, do not lower your thorax while exhaling)
4. Release your perineum
5. Release your stomach muscles (which will automatically make you inhale)

This can be done in sets of 12 breaths. Do not do too many, as that can cause unnecessary stress to the perineum.

Protection in everyday movements

Whenever you use your abdominal muscles, try thinking of tightening your perineum muscles as well. This helps protect your perineum. You can do this by:

1. Locking the perineum muscles before any straining physical effort
2. Exhaling before any straining physical effort.

You should note that this is hard to think of at first. With practice, the brain will automatically do it. At that point, you'll even be able to notice what type of movements create pressure on your perineum!

Before giving birth:

You can do all of the above mentioned exercises in preparation for labour. The exercises can be done as described above. Placing your elbows on your knees will even help make room in your belly.

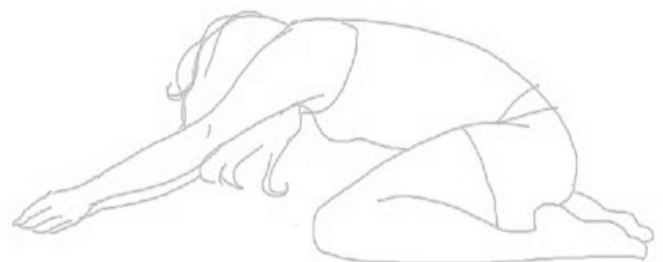
Strengthening your perineum is perfectly safe during pregnancy and can even help with incontinence, which is common because of the hormone relaxin that relaxes the ligaments in the pelvis. This is especially common in subsequent pregnancies.

After giving birth:

1. Right after birth, you can practice tightening your perineum. It is very likely that you won't feel anything at all in the beginning. You should continue anyways. You should also think of exhaling every time you move around (like when you straighten yourself up, when you get up in and from bed, etc.)
2. As soon as possible, and as soon as you feel ready, you can start exercises while lying on your back in bed, legs bent and feet flat on the mattress, as pictured below.

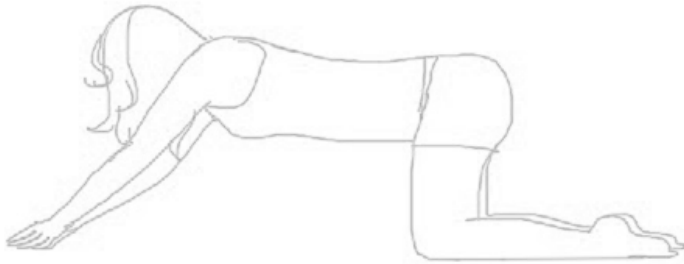


3. If you have difficulty feeling the correct movement, you can also try going on all fours. While kneeling on your bed, put your toes together and sit on your heels, as pictured below. Your hands should be stretched out as far as possible in front of you.

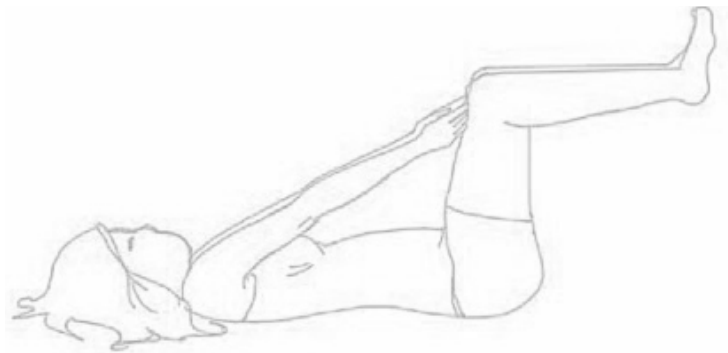


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Once you are comfortably in this position, pull yourself up on all fours, bringing your hips up and aligned (parallel) with your knees. Note that your shoulders should not be parallel with your hands, allowing your hands and wrists to be comfortable.



- a) Clench your perineum
- b) Blow air up and down by pushing on your hands
- c) Release your perineum
- d) Release your belly (and thus inhaling)



BASIC POSTNATAL EXERCISES

These exercises aim on one hand to strengthen the perineum and, on the other, to make your abdominals work in a way that is not traumatic for your perineum.

The physiological diastasis that manifests during pregnancy on the rectus abdominis (the two, parallel muscles that run vertically down the front wall of the abdomen) should be strengthened to avoid any weakness to the linea alba (the white line of connective tissue that runs in between the rectus abdominis)

1. Repeat the basic breathing exercises from above while lying on your back, your legs bent, in sets of 10 (make sure to never force exhalation from the top of your chest/thorax).
2. While lying on your back, put your feet up against the wall.
3. Place your hands on your knees with your fingers turned inwards and elbows apart. Perform the breathing exercises while clenching your perineum muscles. When it's time to exhale, push your hands towards your knees (as if you're pushing your feet into the wall). If the exercise is done well, your back should be pushed into the ground, allowing your neck to stretch and your belly to move inwards, towards the spine.

4. In the same position, continue by putting both hands on your right knee. Repeat the same breathing exercises as above. Do this 5 times, then repeat on left knee.
5. In the same position, continue by putting both hands in the middle of your right thigh. Repeat the same breathing exercises as above. Do this 5 times, and repeat on middle left thigh.
6. In the same position, continue by putting both hands at the base of your right thigh. Repeat the same breathing exercises as above. Do this 5 times, and repeat on the base of your left thigh.

These four exercises will help bring your rectus abdominis closer together.

If you feel like these exercises are well integrated, you can make them even more effective by tightening your perineum muscles a second time right before releasing them. The perineum muscles will tighten more profoundly than the first time, thus strengthening the muscles that run alongside the entire length of the vagina (the external and internal muscles are antagonist, and therefore cannot contract together).