

Pelvic Floor in Pregnancy, Labour & Beyond!

What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor describes all structures inside the pelvis including pelvic floor muscles, connective tissue, blood vessels, nerves & organs (reproductive, bladder, rectum).

The pelvic floor muscles and connective tissue work together to assist in:

- Support of the pelvic organs in the pelvic cavity holding them in place (preventing prolapse);
- Provide sensation and tone required for pain free and enjoyable sexual intercourse;
- Maintaining continence by helping keep closure around the bladder (to prevent urine leakage) and rectum (to prevent bowel leakage); and
- Work with muscles of the back, deep abdominals, diaphragm and hips to help in stabilising the back, pelvis, hips and rib cage.

In pregnancy the pelvic floor plays an extra role to:

- Support the full weight of the growing baby, uterus, amniotic fluid and placenta; and
- Stretch and open to provide passageway for the baby in vaginal deliveries;
- Help in the push phase of labour to move the baby through the birth canal.

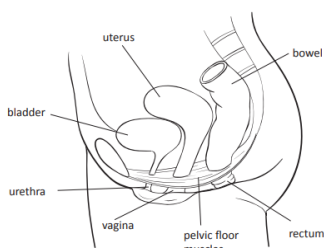


For those who are visual learners there is a great 3D animation showing your pelvic floor from the continence foundation of Australia which you can find at https://youtu.be/q0_JAoaM6pU.

Changes to the Pelvic Floor in Pregnancy:

During pregnancy, the body undergoes hormonal changes that prepares the body for delivery. The hormonal changes affect the muscles & connective tissue of the pelvis & vagina to make them more flexible to prepare to deliver the baby.

Whether you then go on to have a natural birth or C-section delivery, your pelvic floor muscles will have still adapted and become more flexible.



Effect of the growth of the uterus on the Pelvic Floor:

Weight of the uterus will increase across the pregnancy. In an upright position most of this weight is taken through the pelvic floor resulting in increased load for the pelvic floor muscles and connective tissue.

It is essential you take care & follow the guidance of your doctor throughout your pregnancy. This document is intended as an information guide only. If you experience anything out of the ordinary for you, new pains or even mild changes in symptoms seek advice from your doctor immediately. If any exercises prescribed to you cause pain or change in symptoms please stop and discuss with your physiotherapist.

A significant reduction in pelvic floor strength is seen as a result across the course of the pregnancy due to the stretching and increased load. However, this can be minimised with pelvic floor training, discussed later.

The width of the gap in the pelvic floor muscles ('the levator hiatus': where the vagina, anus and perineum are located) will increase across the course of the pregnancy to make room for the baby to deliver.

The growing uterus can also put pressure on the bladder forcing a tilting of the bladder neck down which may result in increased need to go to the toilet.

How to reduce pressure on your Pelvic Floor:

- **Avoid constipation or straining on the toilet:**
 - Fluid intake and diet are important. Talk to your doctor if you have constipation for advice.
 - Toileting postures can help improve ease of bowel emptying: try lean forward with feet on a footstool
- **Limit standing long periods** when possible - take frequent sitting breaks if your job involves a lot of standing
- **Postural awareness:**
 - The weight of your uterus in pregnancy can cause you to tilt your pelvis forward or tuck your tailbone under to compensate for the weight of the uterus.
 - The pelvic floor functions best in a neutral spine however, so one of the simplest ways to protect your pelvic floor is to stand tall and try to maintain a neutral spine.
- **Breathing:**
 - The pelvic floor is connected to your diaphragm and breathing directly affects the way your pelvic floor functions. The pelvic floor will naturally open and lengthen as you inhale and gently lift and contract as you exhale. Deep diaphragmatic breathing will therefore help create space in your body to allow the pelvic floor to move naturally.
- **Pelvic floor/core training:**
 - Learn to use your pelvic floor effectively
 - Learn to use your pelvic floor muscles to support when coughing, sneezing, laughing etc.
 - Learn to use your deep core muscles effectively - this means learning how to control your muscles and not contract too tightly as this can put downward pressure on the pelvic floor
 - Learn to relax your pelvic floor muscles - important especially in vaginal deliveries to allow the passage of your baby through the birth canal
- **Limit heavy lifting where possible OR where it is not always possible to avoid lifting (e.g. other children) learn to use your pelvic floor when lifting**
 - Exhale & engage your pelvic floor during the part of the movement that requires most effort.
 - If you have toddlers, use a pram or ask them to walk instead of carrying where possible

Why is pelvic floor strength so important in Pregnancy and after Pregnancy?

With all this information in mind, it is now clear that women need to be thinking about the importance of pelvic floor strength before they even conceive a baby!

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