

# PHYSIOTHERAPY EXERCISE & ADVICE AFTER YOUR SURGERY:

## Starting your recovery in the early days:

It is very important to rest to help with your recovery. Rest on your back or side to minimise discomfort, reduce swelling and take extra weight off your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.

### EXERCISE

Circulatory and deep breathing exercises should be started as soon as possible after your surgery. Pelvic floor and deep abdominal exercises can be started 1-2 days following surgery, provided there is no increase in your pain.

### GETTING MOVING

Sitting out of bed and walking the day after your operation is the most effective way to a smooth recovery. Each day try to sit out for longer and walk further. Pain can make moving difficult so make sure that you let your nurse know how your pain is to allow you to get moving.

### Getting In and out of bed

#### Getting out of bed

- Gently breath out as you initiate the movement
- Bend your knees and roll onto your side
- Slide your feet over the edge of the bed
- Push yourself up to sitting using your elbow and hand

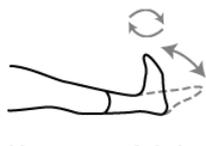
#### Getting in to bed

- Gently breath out as you initiate the movement
- Sit your bottom down square on the bed
- Lower your head and shoulders onto the pillow
- At the same time lift your legs up onto the bed



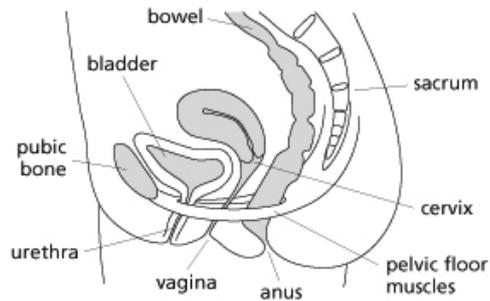
### Circulation Exercises

Move your feet forwards and back and around in circles 20 times every hour while resting in bed.



## Pelvic floor muscle training

Pelvic floor muscles are very important as they control the bladder and bowel, they support the pelvic organs and they are important for sexual function. They attach to the pubic bone at the front and tail bone at the back. It is important for all women to strengthen their pelvic floor muscles.



There are 2 exercises that we recommend for retraining your pelvic floor.

To begin, lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet supported but apart.

### 1. Long hold

- Start your squeeze at the back passage, like you are trying to stop wind passing. Then lift and bring it forward as you were trying to stop yourself passing urine.
- It can be helpful to start the movement as you start to breathe out. Ensure you continue to breathe normally as you hold.
- Hold for 3 seconds, keep your abdominal, buttock and thigh muscles relaxed.
- Relax for 3 seconds.
- Repeat this exercise another 5 times
- Repeat 3 times a day.
- As your pelvic floor muscles get stronger, practise in sitting and standing. Gradually increase the hold time and number of repetitions until you can do a 10 second hold 10 times in a row.
- Always stop exercising when the muscle fatigues.

### 2. Quick holds

- Tighten the pelvic floor muscles as above but only hold for a second before letting go fully.
- Repeat 5 times in a row.
- Repeat 3 times a day.
- Gradually increase your repetitions until you can do 10 quick squeezes in a row, it may take a few months to be able to do this.

### The Knack

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles quickly and strongly when coughing, sneezing and laughing and during effortful activities such as lifting. This will give you more control of your bladder and retrain your pelvic floor muscles. Try not to bend, stay still and have your ribs stacked over your pelvis.

To be effective aim to do your pelvic floor muscle training 3 times a day, every day. If you have ongoing issues with poor bladder or bowel control, or find it very difficult to progress the exercises, you can self refer to physiotherapy up to 6 months after your surgery.

### **Healthy bladder and bowel habits**

- Empty your bladder within 4 to 6 hours of having your catheter removed, if you have any difficulty emptying your bladder talk to your nurse.
- Drink 1.5-2 litres of fluid a day evenly spread out (water is preferable to tea and coffee)
- Eat plenty of high fibre foods (eg. fruits, vegetables)
- Don't ignore urges to use your bladder or bowel. Let your nurse know if you are not getting any urge to empty.
- For comfort when opening your bowels, if you had abdominal surgery support your tummy with your hands or a folded towel. If it was vaginal, hold some folded toilet paper and support your vagina in front of your back passage.
- Avoid straining – take your time when emptying your bladder and bowel to ensure complete emptying. Sit leaning forward, with your elbows on your knees, let your tummy relax. Use a foot stool or lift your heels up off the floor so that your knees are above your hips. Don't hold your breath. It can be helpful instead to take a deep breath into the tummy.
- If you need further help to empty the bowels try to gently push towards the back passage as you breath out. It can be helpful to make sounds such as mooooo/iiddddgge.
- Repeat this as necessary.



### **Deep breathing**

Once you are awake take 5 deep breaths. As you breathe in let your tummy rise, pause, and as you breathe out let it fall. Repeat this every hour.

If you feel phlegm in your throat or you feel a bit chesty, do a strong huff (like fogging up a mirror). If the huff doesn't help, try a gentle cough. Support your stitches in your tummy with your hands or pillow. If you had vaginal surgery, bend your knees and press them together.

Deep breathing can also work well to provide some pain relief and gently stimulate the bowels. It can also help to

waken the abdominal muscles up. Below we will show you how to incorporate the breath with your abdominal muscles.

### **Learning to activate the core with the breath**

Abdominal muscles are important for back support.

1. Deep abdominal exercise
  - Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet supported and hip distance apart.
  - Breathe in and let your tummy rise
  - Breathe out as you gently tighten your lower abdominal muscles by pulling your lower belly in towards your spine (as if getting into tight trousers).
  - Keep your upper abdominal muscles relaxed throughout the exercise and breathe normally
  - Hold the position for 3 seconds. Repeat 5 times, 3 times a day.
  - Use this breathing strategy when completing certain activities like sitting to standing, lifting and walking
  - As you get stronger do the exercise in sitting, all fours and standing and gradually increase the hold time up to 60 seconds



2. Knee rolls
  - Start as in exercise 1.
  - Tighten your lower abdominal muscles,
  - Slowly lower both knees to the right as far as is comfortable.
  - Use your tummy muscles to slowly bring your knees back to the middle and relax there.
  - Repeat to the left.
  - Do this 3 times each side, 3 times a day.
  - Gradually increase your repetitions until you can do 10 each side.
  - This exercise can be helpful in relieving wind discomfort following surgery.

3. Pelvic tilts (start as in exercise 1.)

Tighten your lower tummy and flatten your lower back into the bed. Hold for 5-10 seconds and let go. Repeat 10 times.

# PROGRESSING YOUR RECOVERY

## Progressing your exercise

You can start to progress these exercises from approximately **2-3 weeks** post surgery. If the previous exercises feel comfortable to complete that is a good sign to progress. Each exercise below starts easier and gets harder, listen to your body as you progress through them, stop if they feel too difficult.

### Knee rolls with stretch to the side

This exercise is similar to the knee rolls as on the first sheet. As you lower your legs to the right start to turn your head to look over to the left.

Use your tummy muscles to slowly bring your knees back to the middle, it can be helpful to breathe out as you do this.

Repeat to the left. Complete 10 times each side as able.

### Heel Slides

Lying on your back with both knees bent.

Slowly slide one heel out

Slowly slide it back to the start position

Keep your pelvis still throughout the exercise

Do 10 times alternating between legs



### Overhead reach

Lying down, legs bent and hands by side. Start to bring your arms up over your head as far back as feels comfortable.

You can include this movement with the heel slides raising the arms overhead as you slide the leg away and draw the arms back as you bring the leg to the starting position.

### Chest openings

Lying on your side, knees bent to 90 degrees. Bring the hands, palms together, straight out in front. Stretch and lift the top arm to rotate onto your back. Follow with your gaze. Aim to keep the knees from moving with you. Complete this 10 times and then switch to lying on the opposite side.

### Single leg lifts

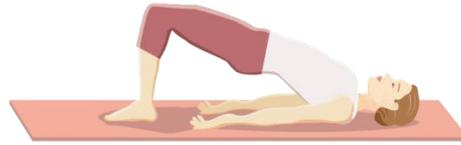
Lying on your back, try to keep your pelvis still as you can, bend one leg up until your knee is in line with your

hip. Hold it and then lower down slowly with control. Repeat 5 times and do the other leg. Don't allow your pelvis to move at all. It can be helpful to place your hands on your stomach for feedback and support.

When you have mastered this, progress to bringing both legs up, one at a time, and lowering one at a time. Don't allow your tummy to bulge or your pelvis to move. Ensure this feels comfortable and doesn't cause too much pain in the abdomen.

### Rolling up to a bridge

Come into pelvic neutral. Engage your pelvic floor and lower tummy muscles, start to lift your pelvis off the mat, followed by your lower back until you are resting on your shoulders similar to the picture here. To lower down reverse this action by first lowering the upper back, then the lower back and then the pelvis. Repeat 10 times as able.



## Useful resources

Rotunda Physiotherapy page has useful videos on pelvic floor exercises and incontinence.

Yoga with Joy has a progressive exercise class post surgery – search 'yoga with joy abdominal surgery'

## In the first 6 weeks after your surgery

It is important to continue with good bladder and bowel habits listed on the first sheet. You should aim to continue to build on your pelvic floor exercises. If you are able to hold to 10 seconds and repeat this 10 times in lying then you may be ready to progress the exercise in sitting. Once you have accomplished the same in sitting, it is good to progress this exercise to standing. Avoid heavy lifting tasks, any strenuous pushing or pulling. Avoid lifting anything that might require two hands. It can be helpful to breathe out and gently engage the pelvic floor and lower abdominals during certain tasks that require even minimal effort.

Ensure to allow adequate rest during the day. Resting with your bottom on a pillow or cushion is also a good way to get relief.

Slowly build up on your movement, as you feel able. You can start to walk for 5 minutes and slowly start to increase your time, aiming to build up to 30 minutes at around 6 weeks depending on your ability. Once this is complete you can slowly start to increase your pace. It can be good to time your pain relief before you go to do this. Ensure you are wearing supportive shoes. It can be useful to wear something that supports the abdomen.

## **12 weeks and beyond**

Recovery times vary between individuals so it is important to listen to your body. After 12 weeks, you may feel more able to complete higher intensity exercises if low impact exercises have felt manageable.

If you have had a pelvic floor repair it is important that any higher intensity exercises do not provoke symptoms such as heaviness or loss of control around your bladder and bowel. If you have any concerns regarding these symptoms you can self refer to physiotherapy up to 6 months after your surgery.

## **Returning to intercourse**

It is advisable to wait at least 6 weeks before returning to intercourse. This allows time for healing around the wounds. It is important to ensure when you do return that you feel ready. If you notice dryness in the vagina using a lubricant such as water based YES lubricant can help to relieve this.