

PHYSIOTHERAPY ON THE MATERNITY WARD

CONTENT

01	Introduction	4
02	The pelvic floor muscles	5
03	Impact of pregnancy and childbirth	6
04	Pelvic floor problems	7
05	Strengthening the pelvic floor muscles	8
06	Tips to go to the toilet easily	9
07	Postnatal physiotherapy and sports	10
08	When to look for extra help?	11

01 INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy and childbirth bring about physical changes. Physiotherapy can help to speed up recovery.

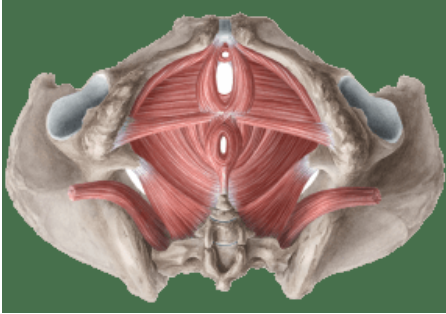
One or two days after giving birth, a physiotherapist will visit you to give an explanation about the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles. The physiotherapist will check your pelvic floor muscles and you can already start with some exercises. Read on to find out why this is important.

In addition, you will receive postnatal advice during the physiotherapy. You can also discuss other physical problems resulting from the pregnancy with the physiotherapist.

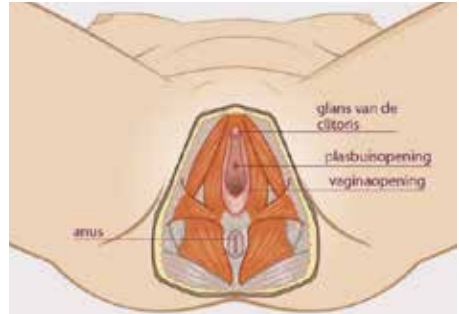
02 THE PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

What are the pelvic floor muscles?

The pelvic floor is a group of muscles covering the lower part of the bony pelvis like a hammock. The muscles support the organs in the abdominal cavity. In women, three openings run through the pelvic floor muscles: the urethra, the vagina and the anus.



Bottom view of the bony pelvis with the pelvic floor muscles



View of the pelvic floor under the skin

What do the pelvic floor muscles do?

The pelvic floor has four functions:

- ▲ Closing the urethra and the anus, allowing us to hold our urine and stool. But also opening the urethra and anus when we sit on the toilet or pass wind.
- ▲ Supporting the organs in the lower abdomen: bladder, uterus, intestines.
- ▲ Stabilising the bony pelvis and lower back.
- ▲ Sexual sensation and reproduction.

03 IMPACT OF PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

Pregnancy

During pregnancy, the weight in the womb increases enormously due to the growing baby, the placenta and the amniotic fluid. The pelvic floor muscles therefore have to work harder to provide adequate support. In addition, the body produces the hormone relaxin during pregnancy. This hormone softens the pelvic floor muscles. The combination of these factors can exhaust the muscles and cause discomfort, such as urinary incontinence. This is especially the case towards the end of the pregnancy.

Vaginal delivery

A vaginal delivery puts a lot of strain on the muscles as the baby moves through the pelvic floor via the vagina. As a result, the muscles are tired and possibly damaged after giving birth and may temporarily be unable to properly perform their functions.

Caesarean section

A caesarean section protects the pelvic floor muscles to a certain extent, but it is no guarantee. The load on the muscles during pregnancy remains the same. So even after a caesarean section, you may have pelvic floor problems.

04 PELVIC FLOOR PROBLEMS

Possible pelvic floor problems are:

- ▲ Urine leaks when sneezing, coughing, laughing, exercising
- ▲ Stool leaks when sneezing, coughing, laughing, exercising
- ▲ Not reaching the toilet in time without accidents
- ▲ Difficulty holding in wind
- ▲ Constipation
- ▲ A feeling of heaviness between the legs due to prolapse of the abdominal organs
- ▲ Pain during sexual intercourse

Know that you are not alone. Up to 80 per cent of women experience one or more of these symptoms during pregnancy and/or in the period after delivery or caesarean section.

05 STRENGTHENING THE PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

The pelvic floor muscles, like other muscles in the body, can be trained to become stronger.

Exercises

Start with the following exercises from day one after giving birth:

- ▲ Briefly and forcefully squeeze the pelvic floor 10 times.
- ▲ Squeeze the pelvic floor 10 times and hold for 3 seconds (build up to 10 seconds).
- ▲ Squeeze the pelvic floor 10 times in two or three steps.

Extra: Squeeze the pelvic floor muscles every time before coughing or sneezing, before lifting an object, before standing up from a chair, etc.

Attention

Make sure to keep breathing normally and not to use your buttocks or abdominal muscles. In between, make sure the pelvic floor muscles are relaxed enough to allow them to rest.

Time

Do these exercises in the morning and afternoon. Try to find a fixed moment which will make you think about it every day, e.g. during feeding time.

06 TIPS TO GO TO THE TOILET EASILY

Toilet position when urinating

- ▲ Lower your clothes to your ankles.
- ▲ Place your buttocks in the middle of the toilet seat, do not sit on the front edge and certainly do not hang over the toilet seat.
- ▲ Place your feet flat on the ground and slightly apart (including your knees).
- ▲ Keep your back straight.
- ▲ Relax your pelvic floor and let the urine flow comfortably. Do not push while urinating and do not interrupt the flow of urine.

Toilet position during bowel movements

- ▲ Lower your clothes to your ankles.
- ▲ Place your buttocks in the middle of the toilet seat, do not sit on the front edge and certainly do not hang over the toilet seat.
- ▲ Place foot rest under your feet so that your knees are higher than your hips.
- ▲ Lean forward slightly with your torso and support your elbows on your knees.
- ▲ Relax your pelvic floor to make bowel movement and take your time.
- ▲ Do not try to push or only push when your abdomen is filled with air after breathing in.



Food

Through good eating and drinking habits, you can prevent and remedy urinary and bowel problems. The stool will become softer and you avoid urinary tract infections:

- ▲ Drink a glass of lukewarm water and eat a kiwi before breakfast.
- ▲ Eat enough fibre-rich products (vegetables, fruit, wholemeal products).
- ▲ Eat varied and at regular times.
- ▲ Drink 1.5 litres of water per day.

07 POSTNATAL PHYSIOTHERAPY AND SPORTS

You can start postnatal physiotherapy 6 weeks after giving birth. This is useful for both vaginal and caesarean deliveries. Under the guidance of a physiotherapist, you will make your body stronger again so that you can resume your daily activities and do sports again.

Preferably go to a physiotherapist who specialises in postnatal physiotherapy. That way you get adequate guidance. Find a professional near you on www.pelvired.be or www.bicap.be. You will either be given a prescription or ask your gynaecologist.

Tips for the first six weeks after giving birth

- ▲ Do not lift or carry heavy objects, such as shopping bags or boxes.
- ▲ If you do have to lift: squeeze your pelvic floor muscles, bend your knees, bring the object close to your body and exhale while lifting.
- ▲ Get plenty of exercise: go for a walk, take a bike ride (after recovery from a cut or tear).
- ▲ Wait six weeks with sports that involve running and jumping. Do not do any abdominal exercises during this period.
- ▲ Listen to your body and try to enjoy all the new impressions as much as possible.

08 WHEN TO LOOK FOR EXTRA HELP?

Pregnancy and childbirth have a great impact on your body. In the first few months after giving birth, you need time to recover. Pelvic floor problems are common in the first few weeks but usually disappear spontaneously.

However, problems can sometimes last longer. Do not hesitate to discuss your concerns with your gynaecologist or physiotherapist.

When might that be necessary?

- ▲ In case of persistent pain
- ▲ In case of recurrent urinary tract infections
- ▲ In case of persistent leakage of urine or stool when moving, coughing, sneezing
- ▲ In case of prolonged constipation
- ▲ In case of pain during sexual intercourse

And most importantly! Listen to your body, give it the time it needs to recover and adapt.
And cherish all the moments with your newborn.

Do you have any questions? Send an email to ina.willemys@uzgent.be.

Maternity

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