Your post-pregnancy body

**Having a baby changes your body. Here’s some advice to help you feel comfortable with your body.**

Physical problems after pregnancy

There may be physical problems after having a baby.

They can be related to pregnancy or birth, or the things you do while caring for young children, such as lifting and bending.

For some problems, you can do a lot to help yourself. For example, if you have a leaky bladder (incontinence) or a heavy feeling between your vagina and anus, you may need to strengthen the muscles around your bladder by doing pelvic floor exercises.

Also, if you have back pain, you may need to learn how to look after your back and do some exercises to strengthen it.

If a physical problem is bothering you, ask a GP or health visitor for help at any time. They can advise you and refer you to a specialist if necessary.

Your postnatal check

Your postnatal check at around 6 to 8 weeks after the birth of your baby is a good time to talk to the GP about any physical or mental health problems you've had since the birth.

Separated stomach muscles

It's common for the 2 muscles that run down the middle of your stomach to separate during pregnancy. This is called diastasis recti, or divarication.

The amount of separation can vary. It happens because your growing womb (uterus) pushes the muscles apart, making them longer and weaker.

The separation between your stomach muscles will usually go back to normal by the time your baby is 8 weeks old.

After you have had your baby, you can check the size of the separation with this simple technique:

1. Lie on your back with your legs bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Raise your shoulders off the floor slightly and look down at your tummy.
3. Using the tips of your fingers, feel between the edges of the muscles, above and below your belly button. See how many fingers you can fit into the gap between your muscles.

Do this regularly to check that the gap is gradually getting smaller.

If the gap is still obvious 8 weeks after the birth, contact the GP as you may be at risk of back problems. Some women also have abdominal pain or discomfort.

The GP can refer you to a physiotherapist, who will give you some specific exercises to do.

Regular pelvic floor and deep stomach muscle exercises can help to reduce the size of the separation between your stomach muscles. It's also important to stand up tall and be aware of your posture.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

Pelvic floor muscle exercises strengthen the muscles around your bladder, vagina and bottom. This can help to stop incontinence, improve prolapse and make sex better too.

You can do these exercises lying down, sitting or standing. With practice, they can be done anywhere and at any time:

1. Squeeze and draw in your bottom as if you're holding in wind.
2. Squeeze around your vagina and bladder (urethra) as if you're stopping the flow of urine or squeezing during intercourse.
3. Long squeezes – hold for as long as you can, but no longer than 10 seconds, then relax.
4. Short squeezes – quickly squeeze the muscles and then let them go immediately. Do this until your muscles get tired.

Aim to build up to 10 repeats of each exercise, at least 3 times a day.

It's important to keep breathing normally while you do these exercises. Make sure you do not pull in your stomach when you squeeze.

Sitting on the toilet can be a good reminder to do your exercises. Just make sure you do them after you've finished.

**Stomach exercise**

This exercise can help you tone your stomach muscles:

1. Lie on your side with your knees slightly bent.
2. Let your tummy relax and breathe in gently.
3. As you breathe out, gently draw in the lower part of your stomach like a corset, narrowing your waistline.
4. Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles at the same time.
5. Hold for a count of 10, breathing normally, then gently release.

Repeat up to 10 times.

Ways to ease back pain

These practical tips may help to relieve an aching back:

* while feeding your baby, sit with your back well supported and straight. Put a small pillow or cushion behind your waist to support your lower back. Make sure your feet can reach the floor
* kneel or squat (do not bend your back) to do tasks that are near the floor, such as picking up toys or bathing your baby
* change a nappy on a raised surface. You could kneel on the floor next to a sofa or bed. Never leave your baby unattended on a raised surface, in case they fall off
* keep your back straight and bend your knees when lifting
* Keep your back straight when you push your pram or buggy. Or, carry your baby in a well-fitting sling