

Ask the physiotherapist

TUMMY BULGE

Q I just had my baby four weeks ago and everything went great, but I have noticed a bulge in the middle of my tummy muscles when I bend forward. Is this normal?

A This is very common but needs to be addressed. As the bump grows in pregnancy, the tummy muscles and their connective tissue attachments stretch to accommodate it. DRAM stands for diastasis of the rectus abdominis muscle, which occurs when the connective tissue joining your rectus muscles (the 'six-pack' muscles) widens and splits. This split causes the bulge you describe.

You can test for DRAM by lying on your back with your knees bent up. Slowly raise your head and shoulders off the floor and feel the gap between the rectus muscles. A separation of greater than three fingers necessitates a visit to your chartered physiotherapist for gentle abdominal strengthening work. In the meantime, avoid abdominal crunches and sit-ups as these will make the split and bulging worse.

BACK TO EXERCISE

Q I am 37 weeks pregnant with my first baby. I was wondering what I should be able to do once I have my baby, as I am keen to get back to exercising as soon as I can.

A Pregnancy causes changes to your body and it doesn't immediately return to normal after the baby is born. Weak and stretched

abdominals, learning to care for your baby, and, of course, fatigue can make it difficult to regain your strength and figure.

However, it is important to build some exercise into your daily routine as early as possible. Current evidence suggests that, as long as your pregnancy and delivery are uncomplicated, mild exercise such as walking, pelvic floor exercises and stretching can begin almost immediately.

Pelvic floor strengthening should be done by all women regardless of how they delivered. This should begin three to four days after delivery. Ask the physio in the hospital for help if you need it.

Basic abdominal exercises such as pelvic tilting and activating your deep core muscles (transversus abdominis), should start in the first to second week. Do not do crunches in this early stage. You may also need to do specific bracing work with your chartered physiotherapist if you have suffered a split in your abdominals (DRAM).

Walking your baby is great exercise without the need for babysitters. Strolling in the first few weeks after an uncomplicated delivery (provided you feel up to it) will lead to interval training with speed work and even hills as you feel stronger. Have a bottle of water with you whatever the weather to keep yourself hydrated.

Aerobic exercise like swimming, low-impact aerobics or cycling is vital for regaining general fitness and losing excess body fat. It can begin six weeks after a normal

delivery. Your previous fitness levels will have a bearing on this too, so speak to your obstetrician or GP about it at your six-week check-up.

SCIATICA OR PGP?

Q I am pregnant with my second baby and am suffering with lots of back pain this time around, with pains shooting into my left leg. Everyone is telling me that I have sciatica and that it will keep getting worse as my bump grows (I am 24 weeks pregnant now). Please help!

A You may be suffering from sciatica or indeed pelvic girdle pain (PGP). Contrary to popular belief, you are not more prone to sciatica if you are pregnant. Aches brought on by pregnancy tend to be in the

pelvis and back, not around the sciatic nerve. Many women who think they have sciatica during pregnancy actually have pelvic girdle pain.

The sciatic nerve comes from your lower back, travels down the back of your legs and then branches out to your feet. It allows you to feel sensations and move muscles in your legs. Inflammation or pressure from the back can make the sciatic nerve painful, resulting in sciatica.

It is very important that you are assessed by your chartered physiotherapist who is used to dealing with pregnant women as soon as possible to determine if it is a sciatic nerve problem or PGP. You will need prompt treatment to minimise your symptoms as your pregnancy progresses. ♥

POST-PREGNANCY BACK PAIN

Q I suffered with pain in my back, where my bra strap is, since I was 30 weeks pregnant. I thought it would go away once my baby was born, but he is eight weeks old now and the pain is still there. What could be causing this?

A The thoracic spine is the area of your spine where the rib cage attaches to your spine. It is a commonly affected area in pregnancy and postnatally. It can get sore and stiff from postural changes (due to enlarged breasts) and lack of movement as your bump grows. This can cause lots of pain just to sit for a while, feed your baby and sometimes even to breathe or cough.

Luckily, it is an easy area for your chartered physiotherapist to treat and is quite straightforward to resolve. Book an appointment as you will need to get your spine mobilised and loosened, as well as go through some postural awareness work and strengthening.

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