

Separation of the Abdominal Muscles

Introduction

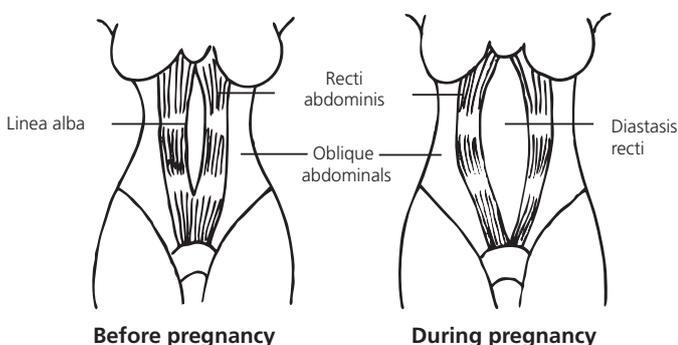
You may have already noticed that during pregnancy your tummy muscles sometimes developed a 'bulging' ridge whilst carrying out an activity which strained them, e.g. getting out of the bath, getting off the doctor's examination couch, sitting up from lying flat in bed or general activity.

This is known as **Diastasis Recti Abdominis**; the name given to separation of the two abdominal wall muscles which are normally joined together by a thin band of fibrous tissue. This softens and stretches during pregnancy to accommodate the increasing size of the growing baby.

This separation is NOT dangerous - nothing will fall out!

Changes in the abdominal muscles

These muscles not only hold your abdominal organs in place, but also support your back. If this separation is not corrected after the birth of your baby, it can lead to weakness of these muscles and eventually give rise to poor posture and back problems.



Post-natal

After the birth of your baby, the abdominal muscles are always initially stretched and slack, but it is possible to encourage them to return to their former shape and strength by doing some simple specific exercises.

If you notice the 'bulge' very soon after the birth, start gently exercising these abdominal muscles by frequently tightening and pulling them in as much as possible throughout all your daily activities. Aiming to get a total workout for 20 minutes per day, this can be achieved by holding gently for a couple of minutes at any one time. It is important to keep breathing normally throughout.

It is also important to continue avoiding those actions which aggravate the separation of these muscles, i.e. getting straight up from lying flat, or any movements that involve extreme twisting or sideways bending of the trunk.

How to measure the separation yourself

The Gap Check

The gap between the two muscles can be felt when the two recti muscles are made to work strongly.

- **Position:** lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the bed or floor. Press the fingers of one hand firmly just below the tummy button.
- **Action:** pull in your tummy muscles and slowly raise your head and shoulders as if attempting to sit up whilst reaching out towards your knees with the other hand.
- **Result:** you should feel the two bands of muscles tighten and pull towards the mid-line as if pushing your fingers out of the way.

- **Estimate:** how many fingers width remain in the gap? If more than 2, start the following special exercise regime and postpone any other exercises until the gap is reduced. (Sometimes, if the whole abdominal area is very slack this test may be left till the second or third day after delivery. If this is the case, start the gentle abdominal retraction from the first day, as described previously for a 'bulge'.)

Exercise to encourage reduction of the separation

At first:



Tummy flattener

Lying flat with knees bent and feet flat on the bed.

- Gently pull in your tummy muscles and flatten the small of your back into the bed. Hold the position for 3-5 seconds and then relax.
- You can repeat this exercise in different positions, i.e. lying on your side, sitting in a chair and standing at the sink.

Repeat each exercise 5 times at first and at least 5-6 sessions daily. Aim to gradually progress the number and frequency of these exercises per day - postpone any other tummy exercises until later. It is very important to gently tighten these muscles before lifting your baby or any heavy activities, e.g. housework as this will help to prevent back problems from developing.

When the gap has reduced to 1-2cm proceed to the knee roll and hip hitch exercises as shown in your post natal physiotherapy leaflet and follow the exercise progression at 6 weeks.

It is of course very important to continue to do the pelvic floor exercises.

Getting out of bed



- Sit tall.
- Take your time.
- Progress to standing SLOWLY.



- Stand tall.
- A GOOD POSTURE IS ESSENTIAL, it will be more comfortable and will help to protect your back.

If you have any concerns or queries within the first 6 weeks regarding **physiotherapy**, please contact us on **01392 406507**. After 6 weeks you would need to see your GP for a physiotherapy referral.

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by RD&E staff undertaking procedures at the RD&E hospitals.

© Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

Designed by Graphics (Print & Design), RD&E