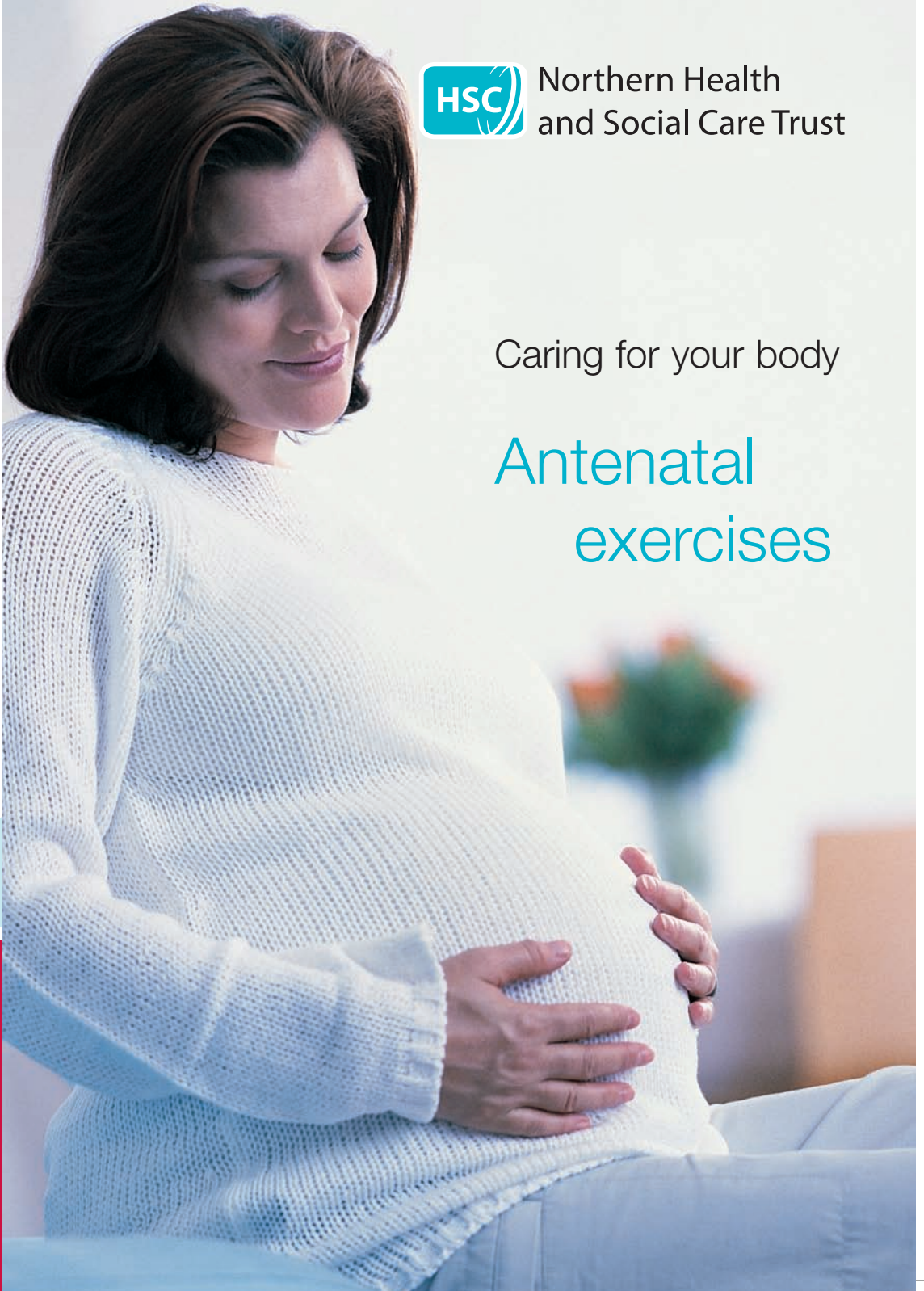




Northern Health  
and Social Care Trust

Caring for your body

# Antenatal exercises



# Antenatal Exercises

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Written by the Obstetric Physiotherapy Service  
in conjunction with the Health Improvement Service.

## Introduction

This booklet has been written to inform expectant mothers on how to look after themselves during pregnancy.

The contents support information provided by the physiotherapist at antenatal classes.

These exercises help to:

- improve your circulation;
- strengthen your pelvic floor muscles; and
- prevent backache.

It will also be a useful guide for those who do not have the opportunity to attend antenatal classes.

You may wish to consult your doctor before undertaking these exercises if you have a history of backache or other health problems.

If you would like further help, contact your GP who may refer you to a Physiotherapist specialising in Women's Health. You can contact the Trust's Continence Advisor directly. The number will be available at your local Health Centre.

## Deep breathing & foot and ankle exercises

Exercise and relaxation are essential at any time to help you feel good in mind and body. Gentle exercises help to improve your circulation as the amount of fluid in your body increases during pregnancy. This creates extra work for your heart and veins, especially the veins in your legs through which blood is pumped back to your heart. Poor circulation can lead to VARICOSE VEINS, VULVAL VEINS AND CRAMPS.

ALWAYS rest with your legs up as illustrated below.



### Deep breathing exercises

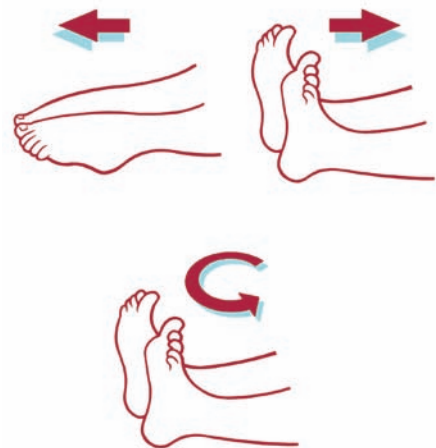
- Breathe in deeply through your nose.
- Sigh out through your mouth.
- Repeat 5 times.
- Do this exercise **6 times a day**.

### Foot and ankle exercises

Keep your knees relaxed for both exercises.

- Bend and stretch your ankles vigorously up and down for 30 seconds.
- Circle both feet 10 times in each direction.
- Repeat **both** of these exercises **10 times a day**.

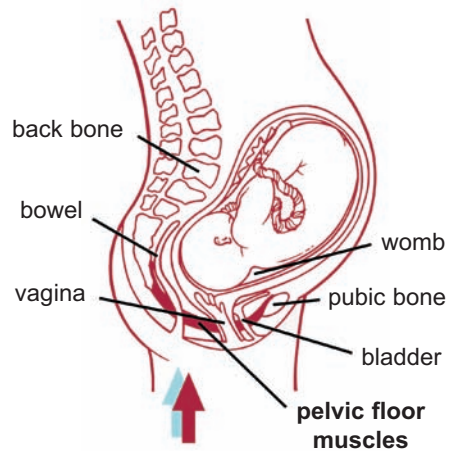
*They will help to reduce swollen ankles and varicose veins.*



## Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy

The floor of your pelvis is formed by very elastic muscles which act like a small trampoline to support your baby during pregnancy. These muscles may become weak leading to a leakage of urine when you cough or sneeze. Many women have this problem during pregnancy. Exercise now to strengthen your pelvic floor, do at least **80** exercises each day.

**Strong pelvic floor muscles stop leaks from both your bladder and bowel. Strong pelvic floor muscles ensure you and your partner continue to enjoy intercourse.**



### How to do pelvic floor exercises



- Sit with your knees apart.
- Don't hold your breath.
- Don't clench your buttocks.

Tighten your back passage as if you were trying to stop passing wind. Now tighten the muscles you would use to stop a flow of urine. Do both together and you should feel your back passage, vagina and front passage all lift and close at the same time.

Now you know what to do, you can do this exercise while standing, sitting or lying down.

Each day you need to do:

**Slow** exercises – tighten, hold (aim for up to 10 seconds) and relax.

**Fast** exercises – tighten and relax quickly. Repeat up to 10 times.

**How often?** – Always do a mixture of fast and slow exercises while seated on the loo after you have emptied your bladder. Make this a lifetime habit.

You can exercise in the shower, as you wash your hands, while ironing, etc.

**Protect your pelvic floor:** Make a habit now of always pulling up your pelvic floor before you lift, carry, push or pull light to moderate weights.

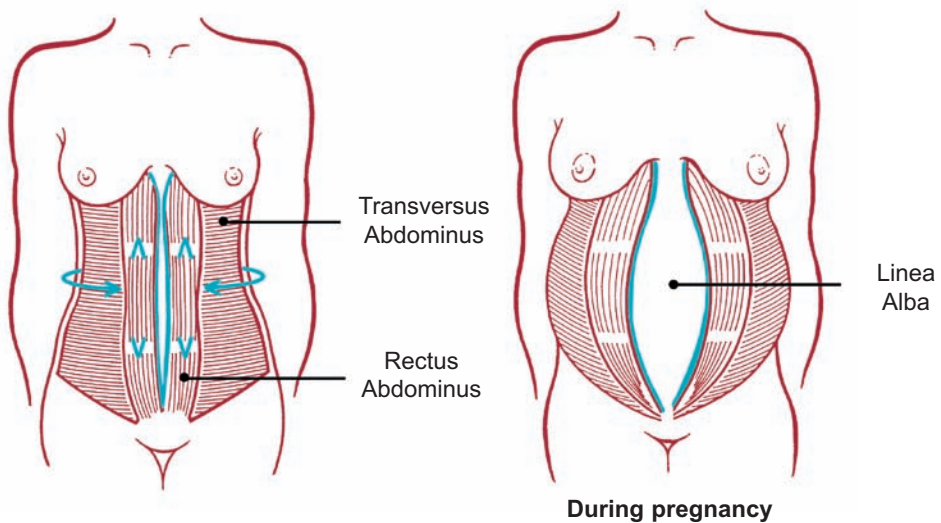
**Lift and squeeze as you cough or sneeze.**

## Your abdominal muscles – ‘Nature’s perfect corset’

You have 4 pairs of muscles arranged in 4 layers – it is only possible to show 2 layers in the diagram: the Rectus and Transversus muscles.

- The Rectus muscles run **vertically** up and down the centre of your tummy.
- The Transversus muscles are the deepest **horizontal** muscles encircling your waist.
- The Oblique muscles crisscross **diagonally** on your sides.

These muscles work together to hold your spine firm, tilt your pelvis upward and to pull your tummy in tight. These muscles bend and twist your spine.



During pregnancy your tummy muscles will soften, separate and lengthen to accommodate your growing baby. This is a natural change due to pregnancy hormones circulating in your body. The gap (linea alba) will gradually close after birth.

You need to do tummy exercises to prevent over-stretching and encourage closure of the separation after birth.

### Weight gain in pregnancy

Excessive weight gain results in storage of fat which is hard to lose after the birth. The average weight gain is normally around 2 stone.

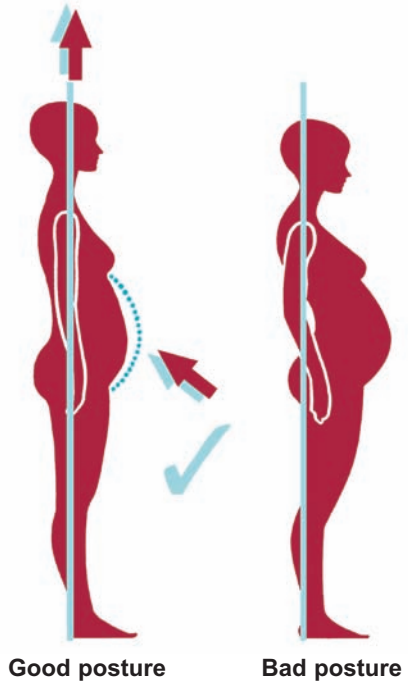


## Exercises to prevent backache

Bad posture, stretched tummy muscles and a growing baby can lead to backache during pregnancy. Overstretched tummy muscles can contribute to back pain and constipation.

### Good posture

- Stand tall
- Bottom tucked in
- Tummy in - always
- Relaxed knees
- Pelvic floor up



These exercises can be done when kneeling, sitting or standing.

#### 1 Transversus Abdominus - 'Nature's belt'

Lift your tummy button in and up towards your spine. Hold 3-4 seconds. (Your shoulders, ribs and spine do not move.) **Repeat 5-10 times twice a day.**



#### 2 Pelvic Tilting

Lift your tummy button in and up towards your spine, tighten your buttocks, hump up your back and tuck your 'tail' under. Hold 3-4 seconds. **Repeat 5-10 times twice a day.**



## Simple ways of caring for your body

### DO

- **Rest as often as you can** with your feet up slightly higher than the level of your hips.
- To get out of bed, draw your tummy in, keep knees together, roll on your side and push up on your arms.
- **Take some exercise every day.** Walk briskly for 20-30 minutes, if able. Swimming is a very good exercise - swim at a comfortable pace. Stop and rest often. Leave the pool after 20 minutes. Women with painful pelvic joints should avoid the breaststroke as this action may increase your pain.



### DON'T

- Do not stand still or sit for long periods.
- Do not stoop. When lifting, you should bend your knees, keep your back straight and pull up your pelvic floor as you take the weight of the object.
- **Do not lift or carry heavy weights.** Toddlers can be too heavy to carry - encourage them to be independent.





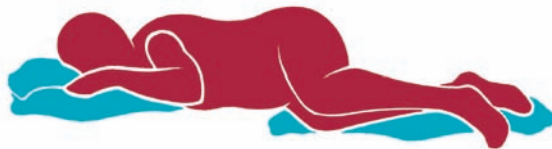
## Stress, tension and relaxation

Some people feel extremely tired, others develop aches and pains which are not due to specific illness, but are related to tension. Tension causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate and rate of breathing which can lead to feelings of panic as well as overloading the systems of the body. Knowing how to prevent tension is a valuable skill which everyone could use when life is more challenging than usual.

Learning a relaxation technique and using it regularly has been shown to reduce mildly increased blood pressure. Women who learn and use it in labour generally cope better with pain and feel more in control. During pregnancy, practising relaxation will help you to rest more effectively and can also help you to get to sleep again if you wake during the night.

### Relaxation

You can relax in either a sitting or lying position. Using a pillow, make sure your head is supported as well as your arms and legs.



**Go through the list of movements below.**

Do one movement, let go or stop the movement, then check that the joint is resting in a comfortable position.

- Pull your shoulders down towards your feet. Let go.
- Move your elbows outwards from your sides. Let go.
- Stretch all your fingers out. Let go.
- Roll your knees outwards. Let go.
- Point your feet downwards. Let go.
- Raise and separate your eyebrows. Let go.
- Look up towards your hairline. Let go.
- Drag your bottom jaw downwards. Let go.
- Focus on your breathing.

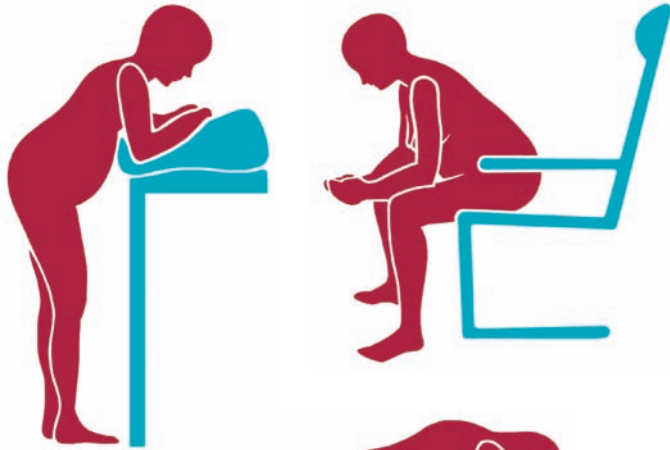
Take some time to enjoy this sensation, focus your thoughts on something pleasant.

**If you get up too quickly after a period of relaxation you may feel dizzy.**

## Helpful positions for labour and birth

**During contractions stay upright, change your position frequently.**

Your baby will be moved through your pelvis more easily if you stay upright.



### Breathing awareness for labour

#### Relaxed breathing

- Helps you concentrate
- Helps you cope
- Encourages relaxation all over your body
- Reduces pain.



### Early labour

**Sigh Out Slowly** as each contraction begins ... **SOS**

When you feel ready, breathe in deeply but gently through your nose. Sigh out slowly. Repeat until the contraction fades. **Concentrate hard on breathing out.** Closing your eyes will help you focus on your breathing.

### Advanced labour (when contractions are very strong)

**Sigh Out Slowly** as each contraction begins. At the peak of each contraction, change to light upper chest breathing. Again **concentrate on breathing out.**

Return to relaxed, deep breathing as soon as the pain starts to fade and continue until the contraction is over.

### During delivery - help your midwife to protect your pelvic floor

Listen carefully to your midwife, she will tell you NOT to push as your baby's head is being born. Pant lightly with your mouth open. This will stop you pushing and will allow your baby's head to come out gently.

## Minor problems during pregnancy

### Swollen ankles and varicose veins

Regular exercise will reduce symptoms. Consider wearing support tights.

### Numb / swollen fingers

For safety reasons, rings should be removed if your fingers have a tendency to swell. This may be a problem first thing in the morning and is due to extra fluid in the body, increasing pressure at the wrist. The physiotherapist may supply you with wrist supports to wear at night which may solve the problem.

**If swollen ankles and / or fingers are accompanied by a puffy face, headaches or flashing lights, seek medical advice at once.**

### Rib flare

This problem is due to the growing baby pushing the ribs out of their normal position. Try to change position frequently and avoid sitting on low chairs and other positions which bring your ribs close to your pelvis. You may get temporary relief by lifting the arm on the affected side and bending sideways away from the ache. Sitting cross-legged (tailor fashion) with hands on head also gives some relief.

### Emotional changes

The hormone changes in pregnancy lead to emotional “ups and downs” and sometimes forgetfulness. After birth, these problems will gradually get better.



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