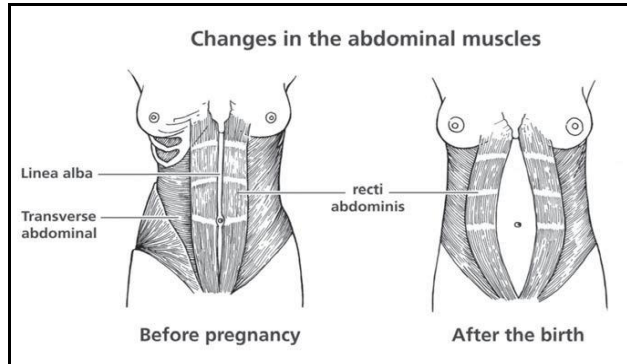


SEPARATION OF ABDOMINAL MUSCLES / DIASTASIS RECTI

During pregnancy/labour the abdominal muscles (specifically the rectus abdominis muscle) can stretch and separate along the midline of your body. This is called diastasis recti.



You may notice a gap or doming during strong contractions such as sitting up from lying or coughing.

What causes a Diastasis recti?

There are many factors which can contribute including: abdominal weakness, abdominal wall stretch, carrying a larger baby or twins/triplets, excessive fluid around the baby (polyhydramnios), several pregnancies, effects of the hormones of pregnancy softening the muscles and ligaments.

What happens to the diastasis recti?

Closure of the diastasis usually occurs within 12 weeks of delivery with specific, progressive abdominal muscle retraining. If sit ups or crunches are carried out too soon, or if the stomach is allowed to dome repeatedly, it may take longer to return to normal. A two finger gap post natally is normal but advice needs to be sought if the gap is larger than this or you are having any symptoms, such as those below.

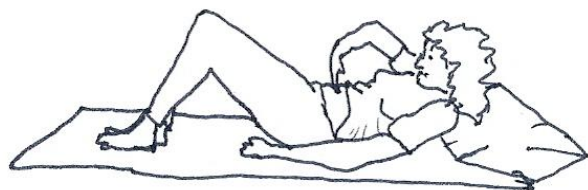
Diastasis test

All new mums should know how to test and monitor the diastasis so that the correct exercises can be carried out and advice sought.

If these muscles remain separated, long-term problems may develop including: Back ache, pot belly, intestinal problems such as constipation.

Self Assessment

- Lie on your back with knees bent & feet flat on the floor
- Place fingers in a horizontal line just above your belly button
- Press firmly
- Slowly bring your chin to your chest, lift your head & shoulders off the bed
- You should feel your fingers sink into the gap as your abdominal muscles squeeze the sides of your fingers
- Assess how many fingers you can fit into the gap
- If more than 2, specific exercises need to be done and monitor the gap until 2 fingers in width or less



Advice:

- 1. Care with lifting** - avoid heavy lifting. Where you have to lift, do so correctly: keep back straight and bend the knees. DO NOT stoop to lift and carry for the minimal distance.
- 2. Getting out of bed** - DO NOT heave up straight from lying to sitting. Roll onto your side first with knees bent then swing legs over the side of the bed and push yourself up into sitting with your arms. Reverse the process to get back into bed.
- 3. Posture** - always practice good posture and gently contract your abdominal muscles when changing positions, standing, walking and lifting.
- 4. Coughing, sneezing, laughing**, etc - support your tummy with your hands during any activities that increase pressure within the tummy to prevent it from bulging. If this is difficult, wrap a towel or blanket around your tummy and tighten whilst coughing.
- 5. Avoid twisting or side bending** - as this may strain the muscles that are trying to recover.
- 6. Care with exercising** - It's best to start by exercising the deep 'core' tummy muscles before progressing to more strenuous exercise. Consult your Women's Health Physiotherapist as to which exercises are suitable for you and when and how to progress. Avoid any exercises, which cause the tummy to bulge or dome. Please ensure your Physiotherapist or Midwife checks the size of the gap at regular intervals before you progress your exercises.

Often the muscles recover quickly (even within 8 weeks) but it may take up to a year for your body to recover from having a baby so don't give up with the advice and exercises.

Further help - there is a weekly Drop-in session every Monday between 2pm -3pm in the Sports & Social club at the Heath Hospital. A Physiotherapist will measure your abdominal muscle gap and give specific advice regarding rehabilitation of both this muscle and you're pelvic floor muscles along with advice regarding return to full activity and exercise. The session is open to all women who deliver within Cardiff & Vale up to 16 weeks post natal and you're welcome to bring your baby. You can contact the Women's Health Physiotherapy team on 02920 744385.

To ensure that the class is running before you attend check:
<http://www.cardiffandvaleuhb.wales.nhs.uk/WHphysio>