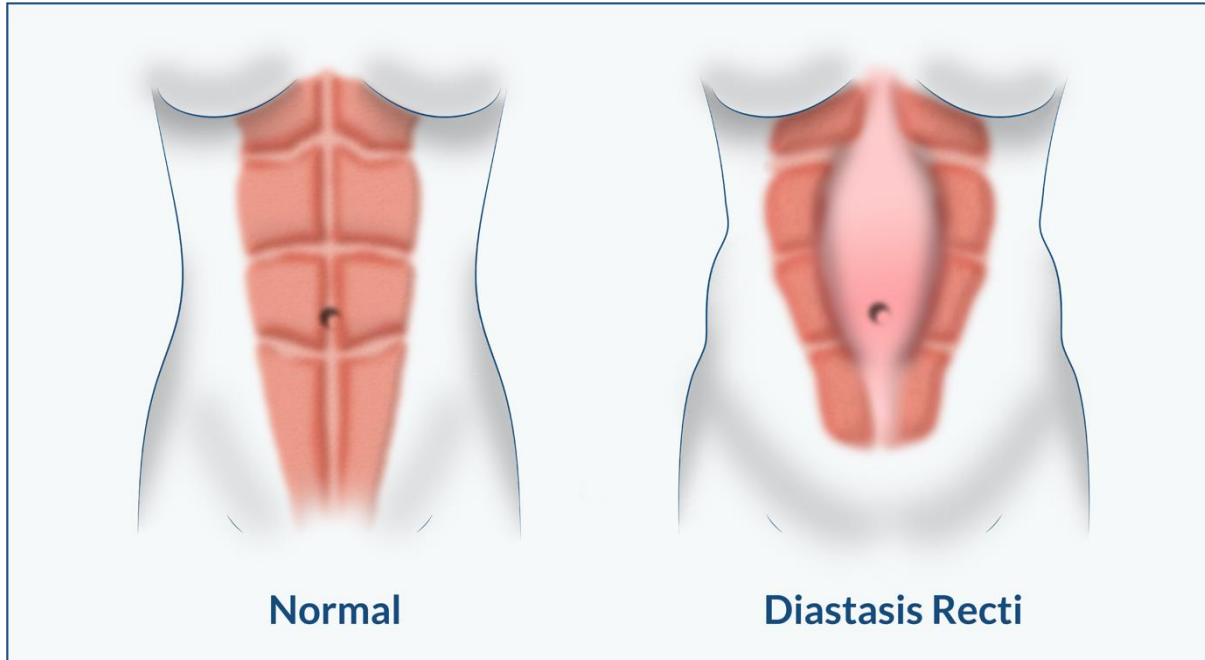


SEPARATION OF ABDOMINAL MUSCLES / DIASTASIS RECTI

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.



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

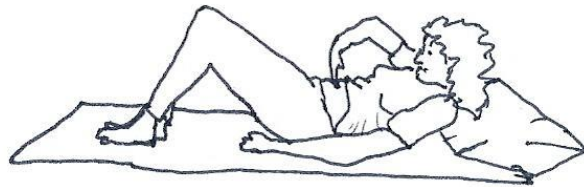
All new mums should know how to test and monitor the diastasis so that the correct exercises can be carried out and advice sought.

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

Self Assessment

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

- 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



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. 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.

Exercises

Abdominal exercises

Finding and exercising your abdominal muscles

The deepest abdominal muscles are called Transverse Abdominals (TA) and they work together with the other abdominal muscles and your pelvic floor muscles to support your back and help with good posture.

It is important to get the **basic abdominal contraction** right. It is not always easy - always seek help if you are finding it difficult. (If you are finding lying on your back uncomfortable this exercise can be adapted to a side lying position.)

1. Lie on your back with knees bent, feet on the floor, relax into the floor.
2. Find neutral spine - neither too tucked nor too arched

3. Find your hip bones (see picture) and move your fingers 2cm down and 2cm inwards - your fingers will now be on your deep abdominals (TA)

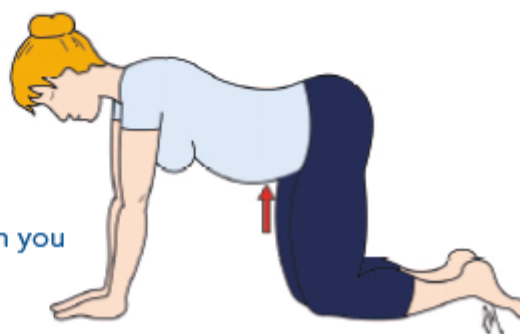


4. Breathe in gently allowing your tummy to rise. As you let the breath out, keep your back and ribs relaxed while drawing in your lower tummy at the navel/belly button level (as shown by the arrow) towards the spine. You will probably feel the muscles under your fingers tense up. Keep the spine in the neutral position and the pelvis still.

5. Keep this contraction in the deep abdominals for 2 or 3 breaths and then relax fully.

Once you are happy with this exercise, you can try using this muscle in a variety of positions.

This is the muscle to use for support when you are being physically active with bending, lifting, standing for a period of time.



Shown in Youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBK1OdevyBA>

Basic abdominal exercises:

1. Pelvic tilt

Do a **basic abdominal contraction**, drawing up your pelvic floor muscles at the same time, and flatten your lower back into the floor/bed allowing your pelvis to tilt. Breathe normally. Hold the position for 3 seconds and release gently. Repeat this up to 10 times, 3 times per day. The pelvic tilt exercise can be particularly helpful for maintaining abdominal muscle strength, correcting posture and easing back pain. Progress by doing the exercise when in sitting, standing, side lying or kneeling.



2. Knee Rolls

Do a **basic abdominal contraction**, keeping your back still on the bed, and your knees and feet together, slowly let both knees go to one side. Bring them back to the middle and relax. Repeat the **basic abdominal contraction** and do the same exercise to the other side.



3. One leg stretch

Do a **basic abdominal contraction**, drawing up your pelvic floor muscles at the same time then gently slide one heel away from you, keeping the heel in contact with the floor. Draw the heel back and repeat with the other leg. Do not hold your breath. Repeat for the other leg.



Shown in Youtube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmqjLD_hJ-c

Beginner <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPzKCM68hIA>

Intermediate <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKlrNDmxx0A>

Ensure you have managed both the Beginner and Intermediate Youtube videos before progressing to these exercises and that you are able to continue breathing whilst holding your abdominal muscles

Progressing your exercises

5. Alternate knee bends

Do a **basic abdominal contraction** and draw up your pelvic floor muscles. Keeping your spine in neutral, bend your hip and float your knee up as far as is comfortable. Hold for a short count then lower your foot to the floor with the abdominal muscles staying active. Do not hold your breath. Repeat for the other leg and do on alternate sides for several repetitions.



6. Single knee fallout

Do a **basic abdominal contraction** and draw up your pelvic floor muscles. Allow one knee to gently fall to the side away from midline keeping both feet on the floor. Do not let your pelvis roll or move. Let the knee lower as far as is comfortable, keeping the pelvis still then return the knee to the midline position keeping the abdominals active throughout the movement. Relax the abdominals and pelvic floor before repeating the exercise on the other side.



7. Bridging

Do a **basic abdominal contraction** and draw up your pelvic floor muscles. Starting in a lying position on the floor, very gently curl the pelvis inwards starting from the tailbone and bit by bit roll your spine away from the floor to create a bridge above the floor. Imagine that you are lying on a strip of velcro peeling yourself away from it.



Gently roll back to start position.

You may feel that you do not get very far at first but don't worry it will feel easier with practise.

These exercises should be avoided if they produce any bulging or doming

You can also try the Advanced video if you are at a level to process onwards
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcjZlqvjKgg>