
Exercise and advice to help you recover after your gynaecological operation

Physiotherapy Department

Patient Information

Your physiotherapist is:

This booklet contains important advice and exercises to help you recover from your operation.

If you have any questions regarding the information contained in this booklet, please do contact us. You will find our details at the back of this booklet.



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Getting out of bed

From the first day after your operation your nurse or physiotherapist will help you sit out of bed. This is important to maintain your muscle strength as well as helping your heart and lungs. Make sure your pain is well controlled so you can take a deep breath, cough and comfortably move in bed. If you find this difficult, you should inform your nurse.

The easiest way to sit out of bed:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent
- Roll onto your side, using your arm to reach across your body to the side of the bed
- Bring your legs off the edge of bed
- Push up using your arms to come into a sitting position on the edge of the bed (your nurse or physiotherapist can help you with this part if you find it difficult).

Deep breathing exercise

Following your operation you may not be taking as deep breaths as normal due to pain, lack of movement or drowsiness. However, it is very important you do this in order to keep your chest clear and exercise your lungs.

Deep breathing is also recommended to help your circulation, encourage the digestive system to wake up, improve lymph flow (lymph is a colourless fluid that forms in the tissues of the body) and help you relax.

The following exercise should be performed five times every hour:

In a sitting position:

- Place your hands on your rib cage
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, feeling your lower ribs expand

- Hold for three seconds
- Breathe out gently.

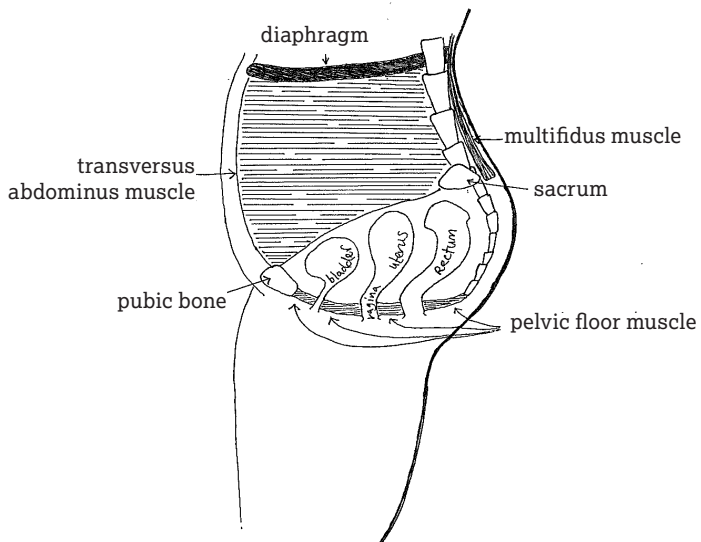
How to cough comfortably - As with deep breathing you may be reluctant to cough. However, this is important to ensure you can clear your chest of any sputum (phlegm) in order to prevent an infection. To support your wound so you can cough effectively and more comfortably:

- Sit up, with or without your knees bent
- Place a rolled up towel over your wound
- Take a deep breath in
- Support your wound by pressing your hands firmly against the towel and then cough.

Exercises to strengthen your abdominal (tummy) muscles

Why do I need to perform these exercises?

Your tummy, pelvic floor, back muscles and diaphragm combine to form your core support as shown below.



Following surgery your tummy muscles will be weak. As they heal, it is important to strengthen them again to support your back muscles and prevent future problems. The movement during these exercises may also help to relieve wind and aid bowel motions. If you do them well and progress the exercises, they will tone your tummy muscles helping you to get your shape back.

When can I start these exercises?

These exercises can be started once all your attachments (such as drains and lines) are removed. They should not be painful to do, however, like after any exercise, the muscles may be sore. Remember to continue to take pain relief to help with any discomfort.

How often should I perform them?

We recommend that you do these twice a day for at least six weeks. If you are still having problems or if you want to progress your exercises, please contact the physiotherapy department to arrange a follow up appointment.

The physiotherapy department can also offer further advice on how to become more active following your surgery.

Exercises

Exercise 1 – Abdominal bracing (to re-learn how to contract your deep muscles)

- Start in a lying position and place your hands on your lower tummy, below your belly button
- Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose feeling your hands rise
- Now breathe out pulling your tummy muscles in away from your hands
- **Repeat five times.**

- When ready, you can progress to sitting, then eventually standing when you feel that you can maintain the muscle contraction. This will depend on how well and often you do the exercises and will be different for everyone.

Exercise 2 – Pelvic tilting (to move your lower back using your deep tummy muscles)

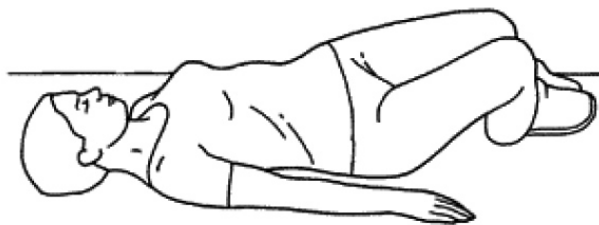
- Lying on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor, flatten your lower back pressing gently into the bed by pulling your belly button in towards your spine
- Hold for five seconds
- **Repeat five times.**



Pelvic tilt

Exercise 3 – Knee rolling (to move your back using your tummy muscles)

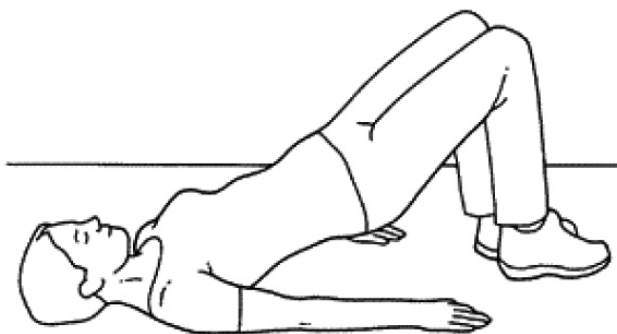
- Lying on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor and slightly apart, ‘brace’ your abdominal muscles as taught in Exercise 1
- Now, gently lower your knees to one side and back to the middle
- **Repeat five times on each side.**



Knee rolling

After six weeks – Bridging (to get your back, bottom and tummy muscles working well together and strengthening them)

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet slightly apart
- Leading with your tailbone, squeeze your buttock muscles
- Brace your tummy muscles and lift your bottom off the floor
- Do not arch your back and remember to breathe
- Hold for five seconds
- **Repeat five times.**



Bridging

Exercises for your pelvic floor muscles

Where are the pelvic floor muscles?

Your pelvic floor is a small group of muscles stretching from your tailbone at the back, to your pubic bone at the front forming a hammock like structure. The pelvic floor supports all of your abdominal contents including the bladder and bowel (see picture on page 2).

Why are they important?

A strong pelvic floor will often help continence problems that can happen following surgery. These muscles work to control when you pass urine and open your bowels. They also play a part in sexual sensation.

These muscles work in two ways. Firstly they provide support to help you to hold your urine in for longer periods so you do not have to rush to the toilet. Secondly, they contract strongly and quickly when increased pressure is put through them such as when you cough, laugh or sneeze.

Why do I need to perform these exercises?

During surgery, the muscles can be stretched or bruised making them weak, so it is important they regain strength to prevent leakage from your bladder or bowel. In addition, some women experience bladder weakness following treatment as a result of the hormonal changes or menopause. Pelvic floor muscle exercises will reduce the impact this has on you and help to reduce swelling and discomfort in that area.

How do I perform these exercises?

Here are two exercises which will help your strengthen your pelvic floor. You can begin doing them twice a day after your catheter is removed. Start doing them lying down, but once you are familiar and confident with the exercises, you should progress by practising them sitting and then standing.

Exercise 1 – Fast contractions (for the muscles you use to cough, laugh or sneeze)

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor, slightly apart
- Relax your thighs and buttocks
- Without holding your breath, try to stop yourself from passing wind from your back passage then at the same time try to stop yourself from passing urine
- The movement should feel like a ‘squeeze and lift’
- Do this as strongly as you can and immediately let go
- Relax
- **Repeat this ten times.**

Exercise 2 – Slow contractions (the muscles that allow you to decide when you open your bladder or bowels)

- Perform the ‘squeeze and lift’ as above
- This time try and hold it for ten seconds
- **Repeat this five times.**

Many people find that they take a few weeks to be able to do all of Exercise 2.

What if I am having chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy following surgery?

If you are having chemotherapy, radiotherapy or brachytherapy then you can still perform the exercises during your treatment. It is important that you continue with these exercises afterwards too.

How long do I need to continue these exercises?

Once you are able to do all of the above exercises easily in standing, you should check that you can still do them a few times a week. This will help you maintain good core support and your continence in the future.

The pelvic floor weakens with age so the exercises should be continued a few times a week indefinitely. If you are still experiencing problems with incontinence which do not improve with the exercises, please contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist (key worker).

Recovering from your operation

Going to the toilet

Make sure you are drinking at least 1.5 to 2 litres (2.5 – 3.5 pints) of water a day unless instructed differently by your doctor. This will ensure you are well hydrated which will keep your stools softer and help to prevent constipation. When you need to go to toilet make sure you are sitting comfortably to relax. If you are constipated you can try placing a small stool, step or thick book/catalogue under your feet so your knees are up more and you are in more of a squatting position. This may help you to open your bowels more easily. All of the above will help to prevent straining on your wound which you need to avoid for the first six weeks.

Lifting

For the first six weeks you should avoid lifting anything heavier than 2.5kgs, which is approximately the same weight as a four pint milk carton. This is to ensure you are not putting too much pressure through your wound and to reduce the risk of a hernia. You should also avoid heavy repetitive movements such as vacuuming or ironing for the same reason. After six weeks, you should gradually begin to build up the amount of weight you are lifting.

Regaining your strength and returning to activity

You will begin walking from the second day after your operation. Each day you should aim to increase the distance and pace. After six weeks, you can return to gentle exercise such as swimming or cycling. You should gradually build up your activity level so that by 12 weeks after your operation, you should be ready to return to full impact sports. You must however also take into account any further treatment you may be having as this can impact on your energy levels and rate of recovery. If you are having problems regaining your previous levels of activity please contact your physiotherapist.

General lifestyle advice

During and following treatment for gynaecological cancer you may notice that you get tired more easily. There is increasing evidence to suggest that maintaining activity levels during treatment for cancer and increasing towards the recommended levels of activity following cancer is beneficial for your recovery and in the long term.

The Department of Health recommends 30 minutes of physical activity five times per week. This activity can take many different forms such as walking, housework, gardening, swimming and yoga. It does not need to be very energetic at first but the important thing is to keep moving and progress your activity over time. Taking the stairs instead of the lift or walking instead of driving short distances can make a real difference to your fitness levels. Ideally, you would be exercising hard enough that when you are speaking you feel a bit out of breath.

Increasing your physical activity can also help to:

1. Improve or maintain your general fitness and make it easier to do more
2. Reduce cancer and treatment related fatigue (tiredness)
3. Keep you mobile, agile and preserve your independence

4. Improve your mood and sense of well being
5. Contribute to regaining a sense of control over your circumstances
6. Improve sleep patterns
7. Improve memory and concentration
8. Along with a healthy diet can help maintain a healthy weight
9. Protect against other health conditions such as heart disease or diabetes

Other important information

Driving

Due to the pressure it can put on your wound you should avoid driving for six weeks. If you are going to be a passenger during this time, you may find it more comfortable to put a rolled up towel between yourself and the seatbelt. When you are ready to return to driving you need to ensure you can perform an emergency stop, turn the steering wheel and use the pedals without any pain. We advise to start with shorter journeys and gradually build up to longer distances. You should also inform your insurance company that you have had an operation to check you are still covered by their policy.

Returning to work

This is dependent on the type of job you do in terms of physical activity and how stressful it is but will normally be around six weeks. Please speak to your medical team for further advice and guidance, specific to your job.

Resuming sexual relationships

This is a very personal issue that can be affected by many aspects of your illness and treatment. For most women there is good healing by eight weeks so we would encourage waiting until then before having sexual intercourse.

Many people can have difficulty coping physically and emotionally following surgery and cancer treatment. Family and friends may provide support or you may wish to access professional support from a counsellor (referred via your GP), your local cancer centre or the psychological support service at The Royal Marsden. You can refer yourself to our service by contacting Psychological Support.

Contact details

Physiotherapy Department:

Chelsea 020 7808 2821 (answer phone)

Sutton 020 8661 3098 (answer phone)

Clinical Nurse Specialist: 020 7808 2294

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Other sources of information and support

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

14 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4ED

Tel: 020 7306 6666

Website: www.csp.org.uk

CSP can provide information on NHS and private physiotherapists with a special interest in cancer care and in women's health. They also produce public information leaflets.

Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP) - Formerly ACPWH

Website: www.pogp.csp.org.uk/ (Information in this booklet is adapted from 'Fit for Life' with kind permission of ACPWH)

They produce information leaflets about women's health issues.

Macmillan Cancer Support

89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

Tel: 0808 808 0000

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and can tell you about local cancer support groups and organisations near you.

‘Get active feel good’ is a guide to becoming more active.

Ovarian Cancer Action

Ovarian Cancer Action, 8-12 Camden High Street,
London, NW1 0JH

Tel: 0207 380 1730

Website: www.ovarian.org.uk

Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust

CAN Mezzanine, 49 – 51 East Road, London, N1 6AH

Tel: 020 7250 8311

Website: www.jostrust.org.uk

References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre
Freephone: 0800 783 7176
Email: patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk

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Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.



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